



THE SECRET PANEL

FRANKLIN W. DIXON

THE SECRET PANEL

By FRANKLIN W. DIXON

No. 25 in the Hardy Boys series.

This is the original 1946 text.

In the 1946 original, the Hardy Boys solve a kidnapping mystery at the weird Mead House, which lacks both door knobs and hinges. The 1969 revision is altered.

The Hardy Boys series by Franklin W. Dixon, the first 58 titles.

The first year is the original year. The second is the year it was revised.

01 The Tower Treasure 1927, 1959

02 The House on the Cliff 1927, 1959

03 The Secret of the Old Mill 1927, 1962

04 The Missing Chums 1927, 1962

05 Hunting for Hidden Gold 1928, 1963

06 The Shore Road Mystery 1928, 1964

07 The Secret of the Caves 1929, 1965

08 The Mystery of Cabin Island 1929, 1966

09 The Great Airport Mystery 1930, 1965

10 What Happened at Midnight 1931, 1967

- 11 While the Clock Ticked 1932, 1962
- 12 Footprints Under the Window 1933, 1962
- 13 The Mark on the Door 1934, 1967
- 14 The Hidden Harbor Mystery 1935, 1961
- 15 The Sinister Sign Post 1936, 1968
- 16 A Figure in Hiding 1937, 1965
- 17 The Secret Warning 1938, 1966
- 18 The Twisted Claw 1939, 1964
- 19 The Disappearing Floor 1940, 1964
- 20 The Mystery of the Flying Express 1941, 1968
- 21 The Clue of the Broken Blade 1942, 1969
- 22 The Flickering Torch Mystery 1943, 171
- 23 The Melted Coins 1944, 1970
- 24 The Short Wave Mystery 1945, 1966
- 25 The Secret Panel 1946, 1969
- 26 The Phantom Freighter 1947, 1970
- 27 The Secret of Skull Mountain 1948, 1966
- 28 The Sign of the Crooked Arrow 1949, 1970
- 29 The Secret of the Lost Tunnel 1950, 1968
- 30 The Wailing Siren Mystery 1951, 1968

- 31 The Secret of Wildcat Swamp 1952, 1969
- 32 The Crisscross Shadow 1953, 1969
- 33 The Yellow Feather Mystery 1954, 1971
- 34 The Hooded Hawk Mystery 1954, 1971
- 35 The Clue in the Embers 1955, 1972
- 36 The Secret of Pirates' Hill 1956, 1972
- 37 The Ghost of Skeleton Rock 1957, 1966
- 38 The Mystery at Devil's Paw 1959, 1973
- 39 The Mystery of the Chinese Junk 1960
- 40 The Mystery of the Desert Giant 1961
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- 42 The Viking Symbol Mystery 1963

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52 The Shattered Helmet 1973

53 The Clue of the Hissing Serpent 1974

54 The Mysterious Caravan 1975

55 The Witch-Master's Key 1976

56 The Jungle Pyramid 1977

57 Mystery of the Firebird Rocket 1978

58 Sting of the Scorpion 1979

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THE SECRET PANEL

CHAPTER I

A Startling Announcement

"Stop!"

Frank Hardy jammed on the brakes of the roadster.

"What's the matter with that driver?" his brother Joe asked.

Racing down the hill toward them was a car out of control. It zigzagged from one side of the road to the other. Any moment it might crash head on into the boys' roadster!

"Better back up," Joe advised. "Oh, look!"

The car swerved sharply, then dived into a ditch. At the same moment a front wheel came off and rolled on down the hill. Afraid that the wheel might bounce up on the open roadster, the boys scrambled out and jumped a fence to safety. Fortunately, the wheel missed their car by inches and toppled over into the ditch.

"Whew, that was a close one!" Frank remarked.

"Wonder if the driver was hurt."

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2 The Secret Panel "We'd better find out," urged Joe, starting to run.

When the Hardy boys reached the car, the driver was still holding the wheel and seemed dazed. But when they offered to help him the man insisted he was all right, adding that he had never been more frightened in his life.

"I never should have let that stupid boy in the garage put the wheel on," he said. "I might have been killed."

Frank and Joe agreed. They offered to fix the car, and while Joe went to retrieve the wheel, his brother surveyed the lopsided automobile. In that position it was going to be difficult for the boys to replace the wheel.

"I wish I could be of assistance," the driver said, "but I don't know a thing about automobiles."

As the boys went about their task, he watched them with interest. He said his name was John Mead, and asked them theirs. On hearing they were sons of Fenton Hardy, he looked at them intently. When the brothers finished their work, he asked: "Would you boys mind doing me a favor? I'm just starting off on a trip, and this wheel business has held me up considerably."

"We'll do what we can, sir," Frank replied.

"I live on the north shore of Barmet Bay, about two and a half miles from Bayport," Mr.

Mead told them. "My house will be easy to find, for my name's on the gate. I'm certain I left a light burning inside. Would you go there and turn it off?"

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Frank and Joe saw no reason for refusing the man's request, and said they would be glad to go. Mr. Mead took a large, strangely shaped key from his pocket and handed it to Frank, who, he rightly guessed, was the older brother. When the boys remarked that they had never seen such an odd key, Mr. Mead said with a smile there were many other unusual things about his house, too.

"Why don't you look around while you're there?" he suggested. "I'm sure you'd enjoy it."

"We'll do that."

John Mead started off, saying that upon his return from the trip he would call at the Hardy home for the key.

"I have no duplicate, so don't lose it," he warned the boys. "Oh, by the way, you may have some difficulty getting into the house, but I'm sure the sons of a famous detective can accomplish it! Well, thank you again for helping me."

Frank and Joe walked to their roadster, climbed in, and headed for their home in Bayport.

"Did you notice the odd signet ring Mr. Mead was wearing?" Frank asked his brother.

"Yes, I did. Never saw anything like it before. I wonder if that queer-looking Y on it means anything."

"Maybe. The top of the ring looked like a square wheel with three spokes," mused Frank.

"Whoever heard of a square wheel?" Joe scoffed.

Frank looked toward the farm they were passing.

4 The Secret Panel "Whoever saw a barn dance?" he said facetiously.

"You win," Joe laughed.

Upon reaching home, the boys found no one was there but their father. He was a tall, well-built man in his early forties.

When the famous detective was not busy on a case, he was jovial and liked to joke with his sons. Now they sensed something had gone wrong, because he was frowning as he sat at his desk in the den.

"Hello, boys," he said, hardly taking his eyes from a letter in his hand.

"Hello, Dad." They waited for their father to speak before saying more.

"Another unsigned, threatening letter today," Mr. Hardy explained. "I've had a good many, but this one sounds particularly bad."

"Have you any idea who sent it?" Frank asked.

"No, but probably it's from a member of a gang of thieves I'm after."

"A new case?" Joe inquired eagerly.

"Yes, and a challenging one, too. Museum robberies in various towns around here."

"Did the thieves get away with a lot?" Frank wanted to know.

"Yes," his father replied. "They've stolen many rare and valuable objects. But what baffles me is the way they get into the places. One museum had a burglar alarm connected with all the doors and windows, but it didn't go off. Another had a special door lock. There was no evidence that it had A Startling Announcement 5

been tampered with. Yet the thieves got inside both buildings."

The boys were sure their father would solve the case sooner or later. Secretly they hoped he would ask them to help him with the case as he often did, but he said nothing.

Frank showed his father the strange-looking key Mr. Mead had given them, and told him of the request the man had made.

"It's an odd key," Mr. Hardy remarked, examining the ornamented piece of metal closely. "It must fit a very unusual lock."

"The Mead house is on the north shore," Frank explained. "Do you know the place, Dad?"

"No, I don't." Then after a pause he added, "Presumably no one is at home."

"Mr. Mead didn't say."

"In that case," said Mr. Hardy, "I don't want you boys to go there."

Frank and Joe were disappointed. They had been looking forward to seeing the place, especially since Mr. Mead had mentioned there were many things to interest the boys at the house, and had offered a challenge about their getting inside.

"Mr. Mead told us to look around," Joe ventured to say.

"That may be," his father replied, "but it's very unwise for a person to enter the home of someone with whom he's not acquainted. This John Mead is a total stranger to us, and we know nothing about him."

6 The Secret Panel "He seemed very nice."

"Well, if you're so set on going," Mr. Hardy relented, smiling, "suppose you stop at Police Headquarters, tell Chief Collig your story, and ask him if he'll send one of his men out

to the house with you."

Frank and Joe did not hesitate a moment, for they were afraid their father might change his mind. They were out the door like a shot. At Police Headquarters they found Chief Collig in his office at a teletype machine. The boys waited until it stopped, and the stout, red-faced man sat back in his chair.

"You've come to ask me for something," the officer said. "I can see it in your eyes!"

The brothers laughed, then Frank told their story. Chief Collig did not interrupt him, but when the boy finished, he leaned forward in his chair and fixed a steady gaze on them.

"There's something very queer about this," he said. "John Mead has been dead for five years and his house has been closed!"

CHAPTER II

Strange Doors

Frank and Joe stared at Chief Collig.

"John Mead is dead? But we saw-" Frank began.

"I don't care what you saw," the officer replied impatiently. "All I know is that John Mead and his chauffeur were killed in an automobile accident five years ago. No one else lived in the house."

"Perhaps a son-" suggested Joe.

"Didn't have any children. John Mead was a bachelor. At least, that's what I heard at the time. The former chief here might have known more about him, but he's dead too."

Their conversation was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. While waiting for Collig to finish speaking, Frank and Joe discussed the strange situation. If no one lived at the Mead house, who was the man they had met on the road?

"Gosh, maybe he's a burglarf" said Joe in a hoarse whisper.

8 The Secret Panel "He certainly didn't look like one."

"No, he didn't. But Dad says some of the meanest crooks are the most innocent-looking ones."

"That's right," Frank agreed. "Say, what do you think that fellow John Mead meant about a light in the house? If nobody's lived there for five years, the current would be turned off."

" 'The plot thickens,' " Joe quoted, his blue eyes lighting up with the thought of mystery.

"Well, dead men don't make requests to have their lights turned off, and neither do ghosts. A very live man asked us to do this, and I'm going to find out why."

When a Hardy said that, one could be certain he would let nothing stop him from carrying out his purpose. It was because of this that father and sons had brought many a cunning criminal to justice. Even Mr. Hardy's sister, the boys' Aunt Gertrude, who visited them frequently and unexpectedly, had unearthed valuable clues for them. Mrs. Hardy, helpful in many ways, accepted it all philosophically, and secretly was very proud of her family.

Though only of high school age, Frank and Joe had been helping Fenton Hardy in his detective work ever since he had left the New York Police Force and come to practice privately in Bayport, a city of some fifty thousand inhabitants. Frank was tall, dark and keen-minded like his father. Joe, a year younger and blond like his mother, liked to get things done in a hurry.

Several times the boys had uncovered mysteries of Strange Doors 9

their own, such as the baffling Tower Treasure and the recent Short-Wave Mystery, which they had solved to the complete satisfaction of their famous father. Now it began to look as if Frank and Joe had stumbled upon another mystery.

As soon as Chief Collig finished his telephone conversation, the boys told him in more detail about their meeting with the man who called himself John Mead. The Chief listened to their story, then smiled patronizingly.

"I'm inclined to think the fellow was having some fun at your expense," he said. "Ten to one, the key you say he gave you won't fit any lock at the Mead house."

Frank and Joe winced under the officer's implication. Collig might be right, at that. And then, too, the man on the road, learning who the boys were, might have been urging them on for some reason. But why?

"Sorry to upset your chance at a mystery," the Chief went on. He coughed a bit pompously.

Frank was nettled, but said evenly, "I don't believe Mr. Mead was trying to fool us."

Anyway, we'd like to get into the house and see if there is a light burning. Dad thought we ought to take an officer along when we go there."

The Chief thought it would be a waste of time to send a man from his force on such an errand; still, he recalled, the Hardys had saved his skin on several occasions. Maybe he had better cooperate with 10 The Secret Panel them. Collig turned to his telephone and dialed a number. A moment later he spoke gruffly into the transmitter: "Wake up!-What's that?-It's early?-Never mind that. It won't hurt you to get up now."

Listen, Riley, the Hardy boys want your help."

Riley! The slow-witted policeman who had been demoted for letting himself be robbed by a thief he had caught! Frank and Joe looked at each other, then nodded in agreement.

They could talk Riley out of any objections he might have!

"Make it snappy!" Collig ordered his patrolman. "Frank and Joe will pick you up in their car. And don't be late reporting back here!"

Before the boys' "Thank you, Chief" had echoed through the room, they were at the door and hurrying down the steps of the police station. Ten minutes later Frank brought the roadster to a stop in front of Patrolman Riley's house. Joe leaped out and rang the bell.

He expected the patrolman to answer it at once, but Riley was in no hurry. He was annoyed at having been awakened before it was time for him to go on duty and, furthermore, he had not forgotten some jokes the Hardys and other boys had played on him. Riley finished shaving, then came to the door in his bathrobe just as Joe rang the bell again.

"You've got to wait till I eat," he said glumly. "And my wife's out."

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Joe groaned. Did they have to delay while Riley cooked his breakfast? Joe stepped into the hall.

"Riley," he said, "something big's going to break. You want to be in on it, don't you?"

"You mean it?"

"Listen, Riley, there's a swell fortuneteller downtown. She'd tell you in a minute you'd be in line for a promotion if you could nab a crook."

"Crook? You want me to nab a crook?"

"Sure."

"Where is he?"

Joe was trying hard not to laugh. "If I knew, would I be here after you?"

The whole thing was over Riley's head. He could think of no answer, so he said: "I got to eat first!"

"I'll fix some food for you," Joe offered, hoping to get action. "You go upstairs and put on your uniform."

He urged the policeman toward the stairs and then hurried to the kitchen. On a table stood a plate of food covered by a napkin. Evidently Mrs. Riley had left it there for her husband. Beside it was a can of powdered coffee. In a few moments Joe had a kettle of water boiling, and made a cup of coffee.

"Hey, Riley!" he called.

The patrolman appeared, still grumbling about having to get on the job ahead of his scheduled time. Nevertheless, he ate with relish and followed Joe to 12 The Secret Panel the street. Frank called to them to hurry, for he felt twenty minutes of valuable time had

been lost. He drove as fast as the law allowed, and soon they were on a highway leading east from Bayport.

"Where we goin'?" Riley finally asked.

"To the Mead house," Frank replied.

"Never heard of it. Is that where the crook is?"

Joe, who was sitting between Riley and Frank, nudged his brother.

"I didn't say there's a crook at the Mead house. But you never can tell."

Riley fingered his night stick nervously as Frank turned into a driveway. No house was visible, but Frank had called attention to the single word mead carved on one of the stone pillars at the entrance. A short distance ahead was a heavy growth of trees, around which the driveway wound to the stone mansion. The house stood about two hundred feet from the water, commanding an unobstructed view of Barmet Bay.

"Ain't nobody here," remarked Riley, noting the closed shutters and uncut, weed-grown lawn. "Guess I'll sit in the car," he yawned. "You fellows go in if you want to."

"Not alone," said Frank firmly. "Law wouldn't allow it. Come on!"

The three got out of the roadster. Riley wanted to know which was the front of the house.

"Looks to me like the back's the front," he smirked.

"Guess you're right," grinned Joe. "And maybe Strange Doors
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if the crook comes out the front door, he'll run backward and you can catch him!"

Riley's jaw dropped. "Eh, what's that?"

Joe did not attempt to explain. He hurried to catch up to Frank, who had taken the large key from his pocket. Reaching what appeared to be the main entrance to the house, the older boy stopped and stared in amazement.

"There-there's no knob on the door!"

Joe ran forward. "That's funny. Why, Frank, there's not even a keyhole!"

By this time Riley had lumbered up to them. After the boys had pointed out their discovery, he too stared in disbelief.

"But it ain't true," he said. "There never was a door without a knob."

"Except a swinging door," said Frank. "Maybe this is that kind." He pressed against it hopefully, but it did not budge.

Riley pushed back his cap and scratched his head. "Queerest thing I ever saw." He peered intently at the heavily carved oak door. "Not a sign of a keyhole nowhere." Then he muttered again, "But it ain't true! It ain't natural!"

"Let's look at the other doors," suggested Frank, putting the key back into his pocket.

The Mead mansion had four outside doors, one on each side of the building. All were ornate, but like the main door had no visible knob, lock, or keyhole. Frank took Joe aside.

14 The Secret Panel "What do you think now?" he asked. "Who was the fellow we met on the road? And what's this key he gave us?"

Joe shook his head. "Maybe Collig was right. That man John Mead probably was just taking us for a ride. You remember he said we might have trouble getting in."

Frank was thoughtful. He had glanced up at one of the shuttered windows, and noticed that it appeared to be without hinges or fasteners.

"It looks as if the architect who designed this place didn't like hardware," he remarked.

"Perhaps there's a keyhole hidden in the design on the doors. Let's examine them more carefully."

"You start," Joe replied. "I want to run down to that boathouse and look it over. Seems like a pretty nice one from here."

He hurried along a narrow path that led from the mansion to the boathouse. A tangle of bushes and large overgrown flower beds indicated that the grounds of the Mead home once had been beautiful. Now they were badly neglected.

The boathouse was locked. Its side door had no knob, keyhole, or other means of

opening it. The two windows had closed shutters like those on the house.

"Wonder if there's a boat inside," Joe mused.

There was no way to find out except by swimming under the large rolling door on the waterside.

At this moment there came an insistent honking.

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Joe ran back to find Riley with his hand glued to the horn.

"Got to go," he announced.

"But we haven't been in the house," objected Frank, who had not yet found a keyhole concealed in the carving on the main door.

"You ain't likely to, either," the patrolman grinned. He had forgotten about the crook he had thought he might catch and so win a promotion. Instead, he was enjoying the joke on the Hardy boys. "No, you ain't goin' to get in, and I got to report at Headquarters. So come along!"

Frank and Joe were not ready to leave. To abandon a mystery before they had hardly started on it was unheard of. But they had no alternative, so reluctantly they got into the roadster and headed back to Bayport.

Stopping at Headquarters to let Riley off, the boys were surprised to see their father coming down the steps. They waited to tell him about the strange doors at the Mead mansion, whose owner was reportedly dead.

"Most unusual," he commented. "We'll certainly have to look into the matter. No knobs or keyholes, eh?" He gazed into space for a moment, then added, "Let's talk it over later. Right now I'd like to borrow your car. Mine's being repaired at the Acme garage, and I must see a man over in Hentyville right away."

Frank and Joe got out and started for home on 16 The Secret Panel foot. Frank suggested they take a short cut that brought them to the back yard of their property. Suddenly Frank caught Joe's arm and whispered: "Look!"

"What's up?"

Frank pointed. Crouching at the back door of the Hardy home was a man apparently picking the lock!

CHAPTER III

The Battered Door

As Joe started to run, Frank grabbed him by the arm. "Hold on!" he warned in a low voice.

"And let that thief get away?"

"If you rush him, he *will* get away. Let's sneak up on him!"

This was not to Joe's liking, but he complied. Tiptoeing swiftly across the yard, the boys reached the lock picker without being heard.

"Say, what's the idea?" Frank cried out.

The startled man jumped and turned to face the Hardys. Bracing themselves for a fight, the boys were astounded when he made no move to run. Instead, he asked insolently: "Who do you think you are?"

"We live here," Joe replied. "And it looks as if we got here just in time, too."

"I suppose you think I'm a burglar," said the stranger. "You Hardys think everybody's a crook. Well, I got a perfect right to be here, so run along 17

18 The Secret Panel and catch a burglar somewhere else in Bayport."

The boys' eyes flashed, and it was all Joe could do to keep his fists under control.

"You'd better explain what you're doing here-and quick!" said Frank, starting up the steps of the back stoop.

"Mrs. Hardy ordered this lock changed, and I'm here to do it."

The boys were taken aback. Of all the answers they might have expected, this was not one of them. It was a plausible reason, but it struck the Hardys as being peculiar, for their mother had not mentioned having any locks changed, and they knew she was not at home.

"Who sent you here?" Frank asked the man.

"Ben Whittaker. Does that satisfy you?"

Frank and Joe knew old Ben well. He had been Bayport's leading locksmith and hardware dealer for many years. They wondered how he could tolerate such a disagreeable helper.

Still suspicious, Joe asked the fellow his name, and was told it was Mike Matton. He whispered to Frank to stand guard while he went inside the house and telephoned the Whittaker shop. The owner himself answered. Yes, Mike Matton worked for him, and on his desk pad was an order to change the lock on the Hardy back door at once.

"Will you please describe Mike Matton?" Joe requested.

Mr. Whittaker's description fitted the young man The Battered Dory 19

perfectly. Joe shrugged, and went outdoors again.

"Okay, Matton," he said. "You win. But I'm sure there's some mistake. Since you haven't started your work yet, don't bother with the lock."

"That's okay with me," the fellow growled, and went up the walk to the street, without looking back once.

"What did you find out?" Frank asked his brother eagerly.

Joe told him what Ben Whittaker had said, and added, "His story sounds on the level, but I'm still not satisfied. I wish Mother would come home so we could ask her."

But Mrs. Hardy did not return, and after an hour the boys became impatient.

"Why don't we go down and see Mr. Whittaker?" Frank suggested. "I'd like to find out more about Matton. There's just no sense in anyone trying to change a lock without even opening the door!"

"Right!" agreed Joe. "And say, we might ask Mr. Whittaker about the Mead place."

Maybe he's seen the strange doors there, and knows whether that key we have fits any hidden locks in them."

The brothers started down the street. They had gone only three blocks when they saw their plump friend, Chet Morton, trudging toward them. He was munching an apple.

"Hi, fellows," he greeted them. "I was on my way to your house."

"To see us?"

20 The Secret Panel "Well, not exactly," Chet replied. He looked up intently at the branches of a maple tree.

"Truth is, I felt kind o' hungry. Thought maybe your mother might have some good cake or pie around."

"Mother's not at home," Frank explained with a grin.

"But isn't there some cake?"

"Sorry, we ate it all."

"And it was the best cake we've had in a long time," Joe grinned mischievously.

Chet looked glum, then he started to laugh. "I couldn't have eaten it anyway. I really was coming to your house to see you fellows. You goin' anywhere special?"

"Well, sort of," Joe replied. "Why?"

"Put it off. I've got something to show you."

"What is it?"

"Come with me to Water Street and you'll see."

At Water Street, Chet directed them to a lane which led to the shore of Barmet Bay.

Leading the way, he walked onto a dilapidated dock, stopping at the edge.

"There she is," the stout boy said, pointing. "Pretty swell, eh?" he asked, a note of pride in his voice.

Chained and padlocked to a pile was a heavy dory. It was nicked and scarred, and badly in need of paint. Altogether, the boat did not look very seaworthy. It had a motor, but the Hardys doubted that it would run.

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"My boat's not so fancy as your *Sleuth*," Chet spoke up, "but I can go fishing in 'er any time I want to."

"Do you own that boat?" Frank asked.

"Yep. Bought 'er only an hour ago. I've named 'er the *Bloodhound*."

"Coin" to give the *Sleuth* competition, eh?" grinned Joe.
"Well, how about taking us for a little ride up the bay?"

"Sure thing," Chet answered enthusiastically. "You fellows start the engine while I get the oars."

"Oars?" Frank asked, not seeing any.

"They're in that boathouse over there," the Morton boy replied, pointing. "Came with the Bloodhound in case of emergency."

In his delight he trotted off at a much faster pace than was usual for him. Frank and Joe inspected the motor, which had to be cranked by hand. They turned it over until their arms ached. Then they tried priming it with gasoline from the tank, but it refused even to sputter.

When Chet returned and heard the bad news, he did not seem at all downcast. The stout boy said confidently that, with a little work on the motor, it would go.

"Can't understand it, though," he remarked. "That fellow assured me it was in good running order."

"What fellow?" asked Joe.

"The one I bought the boat from." After a moment's reflection Chet added, "But I s'pose I should have tried it first to see that everything was all right."

Frank and Joe agreed, but said nothing. Chet was a bright boy, but sometimes his hindsight was better than his foresight.

"Let's go for a ride, anyway," Chet urged. "You fellows can row."

"We?" Frank laughed.

"Well, after all, there are two of you, and there's only one of me!"

It was finally agreed the boys would take turns. Chet grumbly took the oars and started rowing. Presently Frank, seated in the bow, noticed a built-in metal box. He tried to raise the lid, but it was locked.

"What's in here?" he asked.

"Don't know," Chet replied. "Haven't looked yet."

"Got a key?"

Sheepishly the stout boy admitted that none had come with the boat. He said he would be sure to ask for one when the man brought the registration and the bill of sale. The Hardys thought Chet very unbusinesslike to have paid for his boat before getting the papers.

"When are you going to see the fellow?" Joe asked.

"In half an hour. He had to get the papers at the bank," Chet answered, starting to puff.

"How about one of you fellows takin' a turn at the oars?"

"Thought you invited us to be your guests,"

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laughed Frank. "People don't usually make their guests work."

He got up, however, to take Chet's place, but before he could he was thrown off balance by the rocking of the boat. The water, which had been calm when the boys started out, now had become choppy. Waves slapped furiously against the side of the *Bloodhound*.

Chet quickly pulled the boat around so the next wave would strike it head on. Suddenly the old dory gave a convulsive shiver. A moment later water began to pour into it.

"The boat's sprung a leak!" cried Joe.

It was even worse than that. In the next second two of the seams split wide open, and water gushed through them in a deluge.

"Jump!" warned Frank. "Jump!"

Chet seemed paralyzed for the moment. As the dory began to sink, the Hardys dived overboard. Chet sat still, like a captain who sticks to his post and goes down with his ship.

Only when the water reached his mouth did the stout boy become aware that tragedy would overtake him if he did not start swimming.

Grimly the three boys set out for shore, as the *Bloodhound* sank to the bottom of Barmet Bay in twelve feet of water. Swimming was difficult in the choppy water but at last they reached the dock. Chet sat down and held his face in his hands. He Was sad and chagrined, and almost exhausted.

24 The Secret Panel "It's a shame," said Frank kindly. "I'd like to help you, Chet."

"Guess there's nothing we can do about it," the boy muttered. "All my good money gone."

"Maybe not."

"What do you mean?"

"The fellow who sold you the boat ought to make good on it."

"Gee whiz, you're right!" cried Chet, jumping up. "When he comes, I'm going to tell him his old boat wasn't worth a cent!"

Although the boys waited around until their clothes dried, the stranger did not appear.

Chet had become more dejected by the minute, but suddenly he brightened.

"You fellows can find that guy for me," he said to the Hardys. "You can find him better'n I can. You're detectives."

"Why do you need a detective to find him?" Joe asked.

" 'Cause I-'cause I don't know who he is!"

"You don't know-you mean, you bought a boat without finding out the owner's name?"

" 'Fraid so," Chet said sadly.

"Maybe the fellow didn't own the boat. He might have rented or even stolen it," Frank said, worried.

Chet gave a sickly yelp and turned pale. "Gosh, then !-I'd be liable," he gulped.

"We'll not think about such a thing now," said Frank. "But let's try to find him."

The Battered Dory 25

The old man at the boathouse was very sympathetic when he heard their story. He scratched his head thoughtfully, then said slowly: "Mebbe I kin help you at that."

"You can?" Chet cried. "How?"

"Seems to me the feller that sold you the boat said he was agoin' to git one o' them express busses out o' Bayport jist about now."

"Wow!" yelled Joe. "Maybe we can catch him!"

The three boys ran all the way to the bus terminal, Chet red-faced and puffing. Reaching it, they found the bus had pulled out a few minutes before.

"What's the next stop?" Joe inquired at the ticket office.

"Lewiston."

Joe reported this to the others, adding, "Lewiston's ten miles from here."

"Can't do anything without a car," said Frank.

"We might use Dad's," Joe suggested.

"We got to do it," said Chet excitedly. "I'll buy you gas, I'll fix your tires, I'll even-----"

The Acme garage was in the next block. The three boys raced there. Fortunately the car was ready, so they drove off at once. Reaching the outskirts of Bayport, Frank headed westward. Just as they came into Lewiston, they caught up with the bus.

"You get on, Chet, and find your man," Frank suggested, as the driver stopped in the center of town.

26 The Secret Panel Chet's teeth were chattering. "Wh-what'll I say to him?"

"You want your money back, don't you?" Joe asked. "Go on! Hurry!"

Excited and worried, Chet Morton got out of the roadster and boarded the bus.

CHAPTER IV

Stolen Hardware

"maybe we ought to go help Chet," Frank said to Joe, observing that their friend seemed to be having an argument with the bus driver.

The operator had no intention of delaying his trip while the inquisitive youth looked over the passengers.

"If you want to go back in there, pay your fare!" the man demanded.

"But I don't want to ride," the stout boy said. "I just want to see-----"

"You give me thirty cents, or get off!"

Just then Frank Hardy appeared at the door of the bus. He inquired in a long-winded fashion what the next stop would be, and how often the express busses ran. Chet took the hint; his friend was trying to gain time for him. He stepped farther back into the bus. In his excitement the stout boy came down hard on a woman's foot. She cried out angrily, attracting everybody's attention.

27

28 The Secret Panel "Hey, you!" the driver called, as his thoughts were brought back to the youth. "Get off this bus!"

In despair Chet, who had not yet seen all the passengers, was about to produce the thirty-cent fare when Joe put one

foot up on the platform. He pretended to push Frank aside, and asked the driver: "What time do you get to Ellsville?"

"This bus doesn't go there."

"Then how can I get to that town?"

"Guess you'll have to walk." The driver was in bad humor. How could he keep his schedule with a lot of boys delaying him? He turned to Chet. "Are you ridin' or leavin'?"

"I'm leavin'," Chet told him. "And thanks for the information."

The three boys hopped to the curb. The driver slammed the door and pulled away.

"Information?" he muttered to himself. "What information did I give that kid?"

Chet and the Hardys walked slowly toward their car. The stout lad reported that the man who had sold him the dory was not on the bus.

"What am I going to do now?" he asked, despair in his voice.

"Frank and I could leave you and go about our own business," said Joe, winking at his brother.

"But you wouldn't do that!" Chet cried. "Think of all the money-----"

Frank placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Joe is only kidding, Chet. What say we get out

the *Sleuth* and inquire up and down Barmet Bay about your boat? Maybe we can find out where it came from," Frank suggested.

"Now you're talking!" Chet looked relieved.

They headed back toward Bayport. Reaching an 'inlet, the boys went to a boathouse the Hardys rented for the *Sleuth*. It was a sleek-looking motorboat which they had bought with reward money received for solving a mystery about an old mill. Chet eyed his friends' boat a little enviously, but he knew they had earned it.

"Which way shall we go?" asked Joe as soon as they were aboard. He took the wheel and headed the *Sleuth* into deeper water.

"I'd say toward the ocean," Frank replied. "Chet's boat was a fishing dory, and probably was owned by someone who went out to sea in her."

"Hear that, Chet?" said Joe, with a wink. "Frank's got his old logic working."

"Wish I had his brains," Chet replied.

"Oh, cut it out," Frank demanded.

The three boys settled down to serious business. They inquired at every house and dock for a mile along the waterfront, but no one knew anything about the dory.

"Let's head for the other shore and see what we Can find out," Chet suggested.

Joe steered the *Sleuth* across the bay. As he neared the opposite shore, he called attention to the property which lay just ahead.

30 The Secret Panel "It's the Mead place," he explained to Chet. "We haven't had time to tell you about the mystery we ran into this morning in connection with it."

Chet listened wide-eyed as he was told about the car which had lost a wheel, the driver who had used the name of a dead man, and the unusual key which was supposed to fit a door without a keyhole. At this point in the story Frank suddenly cried out: "I've lost it!"

"Lost what?" Chet asked.

"The key! The key the man gave us!" Frank was frantically going through his pockets.

Joe stared at his brother, unbelieving. Finally he said, "Maybe you left it at home."

"No. I wish I had." Frank groaned. "I guess it fell from my pocket when we dived out of Chet's boat."

"What'll you do?" Chet asked.

"I don't know."

"Maybe the key wouldn't open the Mead doors anyway," said Joe consolingly. "Chief Collig didn't think it would, remember?"

"But just the same, I wish I hadn't lost it," said Frank.

The Hardy boy was worried. If the man who had given the key to him should come back for it, the situation would be

very embarrassing. Chet tried to make Frank feel better by saying a door without a keyhole certainly did not need a key, so why worry about it?

Stolen Hardware 31

"I'd like to see those doors," he added. "Let's tie up and have a look."

Joe cut the motor and allowed the *Sleuth* to drift to shore. Here he made it fast to the little platform adjoining the Mead boathouse. The boys got out and walked to the side door.

"Yipe!" cried Chet. "It's true! You know, fellows, I didn't believe you when you said there wasn't a keyhole in any of the doors here. But now-gee whiz, how do you get the thing open?"

"If we knew, we'd have been inside long ago," Joe answered him.

"Boy, this is a mystery," remarked Chet. "Let's go to the house."

The Hardys led the way to the mansion. Their friend gaped blankly at the heavily carved rear door.

"Are all the doors carved?" he asked.

"Yes. Each has a different design, though. But not one of them has a keyhole or a knob,"

Joe told him. "Queer, eh?"

As the boys rounded the house to inspect the front door, they heard a car coming along the driveway. Frank and Joe thought it might be the man who called himself John Mead,

so they waited. To their amazement, when the automobile rounded the winding approach to the house, its driver jammed on the brakes, and backed around the curve.

"Well, what do you make of that?" cried Joe.

"Looks as if somebody didn't want to meet us," Frank replied.

32

The Secret Panel He ran forward, trying to catch a glimpse of the driver or his license plate, but the car

was almost out of sight. When the driver reached the highway, he turned in the direction of Bayport.

Frank glanced at his wrist watch, for Mr. Hardy had taught his sons always to note the exact time any unusual circumstance occurred.

"What time is it?" Chet asked.

"Four-thirty."

"Yipe!" squealed the stout boy. "I'm supposed to meet my mother at five o'clock!"

The Hardys smiled. Poor Chet! His memory played him one trick after another! The three boys hurried to the boathouse and jumped into the *Sleuth*. Joe sent it skimming across the water. Ten minutes later Chet alighted.

"See you tomorrow, fellows," he called. "And don't forget to work on my case."

As the Hardys tied up their boat, they suddenly realized their chum had not given them a detailed description of the

stranger who had sold him the dory. A stocky man of thirty, who did not smile, was not much help in trying to locate the culprit.

Reaching home, the brothers found their mother had returned. She was in the kitchen mixing batter for muffins, and from the oven came the appetizing odor of roast beef. Frank and Joe hugged her affectionately, complimenting her on the good dinner.

"Was the hug for me or for the dinner?" Mrs. Hardy teased them.

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"Oh, *Mother*," her sons chorused, and Joe added, "You know you're the best mother in all the world. But I wish you wouldn't keep so many secrets to yourself."

"Secrets?" Mrs. Hardy asked, puzzled.

From the two boys she learned the story of Mike Matton, and how he had been about to change the back-door lock when they had suddenly stopped him.

"Well, I'm certainly glad you did," their mother said. "There must be some mistake. I didn't phone Ben Whittaker."

"We didn't think you had," said Frank. "I'm going right down there and find out what that fellow Matton was talking about. Come on, Joe."

Ten minutes later the boys came to old Ben Whittaker's store. The proprietor was just closing his shop, but he smiled at the brothers and let them in.

"Has Mike Matton gone for the day?" Frank asked quickly.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, he didn't come back here after he went out on some errands a few hours ago."

"Mr. Whittaker, have you found him to be entirely honest?" Joe startled the man by saying.

"Why-er-yes. I guess so. What's on your mind, son?"

The Hardys told the elderly man the incident of Mike Matton and the back-door lock, and how their mother had not telephoned to have it changed. Ben 34 The Secret Panel Whittaker became concerned at once. He went into his shop to look at the order pad.

"Yes, here it is," he said. "Just like I told you on the phone this afternoon."

"May I see it?" Frank requested.

Ben Whittaker handed over the pad. On it was their own name and also that of a family named Eccles. Frank suggested that he telephone Mrs. Eccles to see if she had left an order to have her lock changed. The shop owner was too nervous to make the call and asked the boy to do it. Frank got Mrs. Eccles on the wire, but he had barely started speaking when there came a torrent of words from the other end.

"So you're the one who's responsible for running off with my expensive lock, are you?"

Well, you bring it back and bring it back in a hurry," Mrs. Eccles ordered. "My husband's furious about it. We didn't order it changed, and this cheap lock your man put on is a disgrace!"

"Please, Mrs. Eccles," Frank pleaded, "there has been a mistake, and Mr.

Whittaker-----"

"I'll say there's been a mistake," the woman interrupted. "And it's got to be rectified at once. You tell Mr. Whittaker to be up here first thing in the morning to put back my rare antique door lock or else-----• "

She hung up. Frank turned to Mr. Whittaker, and repeated the conversation. The elderly man paced up and down, completely baffled. Mike Mat-Stolen Hardware 35

ton had brought excellent references; surely the fellow was honest.

"Where does he live?" asked Joe, who did not share Ben Whittaker's feeling of trust in the young locksmith.

"In a boardinghouse on Dover Street. I'll get him on the phone."

The woman who answered the telephone said Matton had not been there since morning, and had left word he would be away until late that evening. Old Mr. Whittaker's momentary hope of straightening out the situation at once faded. The Hardys felt they could do nothing more, so with a wish that everything would turn out all right, they said "Good night."

Both boys felt uneasy, and were suspicious of Mike Matton. One mistake might occur, but hardly two of the same kind.

"What I can't understand," said Joe, "is why our house and Eccles' were picked out.

Theirs had a valuable lock that might be worth stealing, but ours hasn't."

"It's a puzzler, all right," Frank agreed. "I'm still inclined to my first idea that Matton never intended to put a new lock on our door; he just planned to get into the house and rob us! But he covered himself nicely with that false order on the phone pad."

When the boys reached home, they learned that Mr. Hardy would not return until the next morning. Mrs. Hardy and her sons sat down to dinner, and 36 The Secret Panel during the meal Frank and Joe told her everything that had happened to them during the day.

"I'd say," their mother laughed at the end of the recital, "that you are on the threshold of two or three mysteries. Which one of them will you work on?"

Her sons grinned, thus giving her their answer. They would work on all of them!

"One thing I want to do early tomorrow morning," Frank said, "is dive for the lost key. I meant to ask old Mr. Whittaker if he knew anything about the Mead place, but I didn't have the heart to. The poor man was too upset."

"Well, I suppose you'll have another big day tomorrow," Mrs. Hardy smiled. "In that case you'd better get to bed early."

Frank and Joe followed this advice, and Mrs. Hardy herself retired at ten o'clock. It was two hours later that she came to the boys' room and awakened them, saying the frontdoor bell had rung. Since her husband had received the threatening letter that morning, he had requested her not to go to the door alone at night.

"Ill see who it is," offered Joe, jumping from bed.

As he spoke, the bell rang again. This time the caller kept his finger on the button. Frank and Joe grabbed up robes and slippers as they hurried to answer the summons. Mrs.

Hardy, on the stairs right behind them, kept warning the boys to be cautious. Before opening the door, Frank snapped on the porch light and looked out.

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A strange woman stood there, fidgeting nervously. She wore a faded pink hat over her straggly hair. A black coat had been thrown carelessly over her slim shoulders. As the boy slowly opened the door, the caller pushed it in excitedly.

"Where's Mr. Hardy?" she cried in a shrill, hysterical voice. "I got to see him right away!"

CHAPTER V

The Traffic Signal Clue

mrs. hardy turned on a light in the living room and led the distraught caller to a chair.

"Please sit down," she said kindly. "Mr. Hardy isn't here at the moment, but perhaps we

can help you."

"No, no. Only Mr. Hardy can help me!" the woman cried.

"Maybe you think I don't have enough money to pay a good detective, but I got a little put aside. And I'll spend every cent of it on my boy Lenny if I have to!"

"Lenny is your son?" Frank asked.

"Yes, and a good boy. In all his eighteen years he never did no wrong, but them racketeers-they're the cause o' his downfall!"

"Have you been to the police?" Joe asked.

The woman gave a shriek. "Police? I should say not. They wouldn't understand. They'd put my Lenny in jail. That ain't never happened to a Stryker and it ain't goin' to happen now!"

The Traffic Signal Clue 39

As the woman paused for breath, Frank inquired if she was Mrs. Stryker. The caller nodded, adding that she was a widow-a hard-working one too-and Lenny was her only child.

"I'm sorry you're having trouble," said Mr. Hardy. "When Mr. Hardy returns tomorrow-----"

The caller wrung her hands. "Tomorrow? I was hopin' he could do somethin' tonight. You see, I got a message from Lenny just a little while ago, and somethin' ought to be done right away. He said the gang nearly got caught, and he'd been shot in the leg."

"Shot!" chorused the three Hardys, and Frank added, "What Lenny needs is a doctor."

"No, no! He needs a detective!" Mrs. Stryker moaned.

The woman explained she did not know where Lenny was, and was afraid he would not receive proper care. "That's why I want Mr. Hardy to find him."

"Did your son give you any hint about where he is?" Joe asked eagerly.

"I think so. I'll tell you all I know."

The boys leaned forward in their chairs, waiting intently for the woman's story. She told them her son had acted mysteriously of late, and that she had suspected he had fallen into bad company. He had gone out earlier that night. Then, at eleven-thirty he had telephoned, saying he had been shot.

"Lenny mumbled some funny words," Mrs. Stry-40

The Secret Panel ker explained. "Two of 'em sounded like 'secret panel.' Then the connection was cut off."

Secret panel!

Frank* and Joe looked at each other. It was a clue, all right, but just where would one start to investigate it? Mrs. Stryker, though quizzed for fifteen minutes, could shed no more light on the subject. At last she stood up to go, disappointed because the Hardys could give her no help.

"But you *promise* to tell Mr. Hardy about it the minute he comes in tomorrow?" she begged.

"Yes, we will," Frank agreed.

His mother had slipped from the room five minutes before, and now returned with a steaming cup of broth, which she offered to Mrs. Stryker. The woman sipped it gratefully, wrote down her address, and went out into the night.

"Poor woman," Mrs. Hardy said.

She shook her head, gazed affectionately at her two sons, and went upstairs.

"We certainly couldn't ever let *our* mother down the way Lenny did his," Joe said to his brother.

"We sure couldn't," Frank agreed.

Fenton Hardy arrived home before breakfast the next morning, and listened attentively to the story of Lenny Stryker. His face grew grave.

"I don't like it," he remarked. "Racketeers, shooting-no, it sounds like trouble among members of a gang. That's something I don't want to get mixed up with."

The Traffic Signal Clue 41

"Then you aren't going to help Mrs. Stryker?" Frank asked.

"It isn't just a matter of helping her," his father replied. "It's a case of finding out where some gang has hidden Lenny. At the moment I haven't time to take on anything more. No, Mrs. Stryker had better go to the police. You run over to her house later and tell her that."

As the family was about to sit down at the table, a car pulled up at the curbstone. The driver alighted, slammed the door, and hurried up the walk. Frank let him into the hall.

"Mr. Hardy at home?" the caller asked briskly. The man, who was middle-aged, seemed very agitated. As the detective came into the hall, he went on, "I've just come from the police, and they seem to be unable to help me."

"Suppose we go into my study, Mr.-----"

"Doctor Lyall," the man announced.

"This is my son Frank," said Mr. Hardy. "He and his brother assist me, so you need not hesitate to speak freely before them."

"Thank you," the physician said. "My troubles are over-at least, I hope so. But something should be done to punish the culprits." He lowered his voice. "Last night I was kidnaped!"

"Kidnaped!" Frank exclaimed.

"Yes," the doctor went on. "I was leaving the hospital late last night when two men came up and ordered me into a car."

42 The Secret Panel "I suppose they threatened that if you yelled or struggled, you'd regret it," said Mr. Hardy.

"Exactly. But they promised I wouldn't be harmed if I did as I was told."

"What did the men look like?" Frank asked eagerly.

"I have no idea," Doctor Lyall replied. "Everything happened so fast I really didn't notice."

The doctor then told how he had been blindfolded, driven some place in the car, forced to alight, and when the blindfold was removed from his eyes, had found himself in a room with several masked men.

"They were taking no chances," remarked Mr. Hardy.

"Even the patient I was to take care of had his face covered," Doctor Lyall told the Hardys. "I thought the poor fellow ought to have an anaesthetic before I probed for the bullet, but the others wouldn't allow his face to be uncovered."

"Where was the bullet?" Frank asked excitedly.

"In his right leg."

The Hardys, including Joe, who had been called in, exchanged quick glances. Could the patient have been Lenny Stryker? To their questions the physician replied that the fellow's leg was the only part of his body he had seen uncovered, and that there was no distinguishing mark on it which could be used as a means of identification.

"All I can say is, the victim is young, and has a lot of grit. He didn't cry out once. And I got the impression he isn't a cold-blooded criminal as the others seemed to be."

The Traffic Signal Clue 43

"What did the room look like?" Mr. Hardy questioned his caller. "Would you say you got into it through a secret panel?"

"I could see very little in the room. It was dark except around the patient. One of the men held a flashlight so I could work," Doctor Lyall replied. "It almost seemed as if the room had no windows, or if there were any, that they were well covered. As for a secret panel, I really couldn't say."

"Tell me about how long you spent riding to and from the place, and if you observed anything on the way," Mr. Hardy requested.

Doctor Lyall was thoughtful a minute. "I don't know how accurate I may be, but I'd say we went at the rate of thirty miles an hour. I was so mad and so worried I failed to take much notice of anything that might be important," he explained. "But one thing does come to my mind. About ten minutes before reaching the place, we stopped. I imagine it must have been

at a traffic light."

"Do you recall how long you paused at the light?" the detective questioned him.

"No, but I did notice a humming sound as we waited. It was almost as if someone were singing faintly," the physician answered. "I believe the traffic signal made the sound. Is this information helpful to you?"

44 The Secret Panel "It's a good clue," Mr. Hardy said enthusiastically. "A very good clue. Boys, suppose you follow it."

"You mean Joe and me?" Frank cried.

"No one else," smiled their father. "Locate a humming traffic light, drive ten minutes from it in each direction, and report to me what you find."

Doctor Lyall looked at his watch and said he must leave at once. He thanked the Hardys for their interest, adding that he hoped his abductors would be caught. After he had gone, Mr. Hardy picked up the telephone and spoke to Chief Collig. He advised the officer to notify every physician in Bayport to be on his guard to avoid an experience similar to that of Doctor Lyall. Then the detective turned to his sons.

"Tell Mrs. Stryker I'll try to find Lenny," he said. "It looks as if the gang I'm after may have him in their clutches."

The boys stared in surprise. "You know who they are?"

"I have a suspicion who the master mind is. There's a very clever crook by the name of Whitey Masco, who has been in hiding for some time. He's a clever safe-cracker and bank robber."

"Why do you suspect him of the museum robberies?" Frank asked.

"Because his methods are always new and original. Last night another museum was entered, but again there was no clue as to how it was done. But just as the thieves were leaving, the watchman, whom they The Traffic Signal Clue
45

had knocked out earlier, regained consciousness and fired a shot. It's just possible he hit Lenny Stryker."

"Why didn't the thieves take the watchman's gun?" Joe remarked.

Mr. Hardy smiled. "Maybe they gave that job to Lenny and he didn't get away with it!" the detective said. "Well, boys, we'd better eat breakfast and get started on our work." He led the way to the dining room. "I have an appointment with an F. B. I. man, and you have-----"

"The boys have several mysteries to solve," interrupted Mrs. Hardy. "One of them is for me. I want them to find out who used my name at Ben Whittaker's shop, and why he-----"

Someone slammed the kitchen screen door, and a cheery voice called out, "Hello."

It was Chet Morton. The stout boy sniffed the air, looked at a platter of bacon and eggs, and grinned.

"Yes, Chet, you're just in time," said Joe. "I suppose you haven't had a thing to eat for an hour."

The boy pretended not to hear the gibe. He walked into the dining room and drew another chair up to the table.

"Good morning, Mrs. Hardy," he said brightly. "Morning, Mr. Hardy. Hi, Frank." As the family greeted him, he went on, "Yes, I've had my breakfast, but I could eat one of those bananas." Chet reached into the fruit basket. "And maybe a small portion of bacon and a couple of eggs. Milk? Thank 46

The Secret Panel you, Mrs. Hardy. Don't get up. I'll find it myself."

As he seated himself a second time, Chet became serious, and asked Frank and Joe if they were ready to work on his boat mystery. He said he had hoped the registration papers might come in the morning mail, but they had not arrived. Now the stout boy was convinced he never would get them.

He wanted the man who had sold him the dory found at once!

"Sorry, Chet, but your case will have to wait," said Frank.

"What's that? Why?" the boy sputtered. "Mine's not a two-cent case. I'm out a lot o'

money. You got to get it back for me!"

"Several things have come up since we saw you," Frank told his chum. "We have to work on them first. But later we'll hunt for your man."

Chet groaned. "And after all I've done for you two!"

"You've done for us?" Joe repeated.

"Sure thing." Chet waved the banana dramatically. "Why, I've got one of your mysteries half solved."

The Hardys stared at their plump friend.

"Yep. I found out something for you. *John Mead isn't dead. And the current in his house hasn't been turned off!*"

CHAPTER VI

A Worried Locksmith

Chet Morton enjoyed the effect of his bombshell for several seconds before revealing anything more. Whenever he could tell the Hardys something they had not found out already, he felt it was a great victory for him.

"You're sure John Mead's alive?" Frank asked, unbelieving.

"Sure am," Chet insisted. "On my way over here I had a hunch, so I stopped at the power company and asked if they have an account for John Mead. They do!"

Before Frank and Joe could think of anything to say to this surprising announcement, the doorbell rang. Frank went to answer it. To his surprise he saw his Aunt Gertrude standing on the porch. Since his relative had a key to the house, he wondered why she had not let herself in.

After opening the door, Frank submitted to a brushing kiss, and took his aunt's suitcase.

Miss

47

48

The Secret Panel Hardy glared at it for a couple of seconds. Frank wondered why. He could not see that any damage had been done to the suitcase which might have upset his aunt.

"That's the cause of all my trouble," she said, pointing at the bag with her umbrella. "I wish I'd never started out."

"Did something happen?" Frank asked her.

"Did something happen? A great deal! Where is everybody?" Without waiting for an answer, the unpredictable woman went on, "They're still at the breakfast table, I'll be bound."

She strode into the dining room and greeted the others. "Laura, how do you stand it to have meals at all hours? Well, things will be different, now that I'm here."

Frank, Joe, and even Chet knew this only too well. Aunt Gertrude, though she loved her famous brother's family, always made a point of trying to improve their habits during her visits to the Hardy home. Her methods were apt to be dictatorial, and the boys had had difficulties with her too often for comfort.

Mrs. Hardy smiled. "It'll be nice to have your help, Gertrude," she said. "Tell us, how did you get here? We would have come for you if we had known your plans."

"It would have been better if you had," said Miss Hardy. "Then my keys wouldn't have been stolen."

Urged to tell what had happened, the maiden lady went on to say that she had decided suddenly to come to Bayport. She had telephoned to the Hardy home A Worried Locksmith
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several times, only to get a busy signal. Impatient, Miss Hardy had taken a bus to Bayport, and driven up from the terminal in a taxicab.

"After I got in the taxicab, I noticed my keys were gone—every one of them," Miss Hardy explained.

"You lost them?" said Joe.

His aunt gave the boy a withering look. "I? Not Gertrude Hardy. And they wouldn't have been stolen out of my purse if it hadn't been for that suitcase of mine."

She explained that a clumsy fellow, who was getting off the bus, had tripped over her suitcase, fallen into her lap, and knocked her purse to the floor. He had apologized profusely and had helped her pick up the contents of her pocketbook.

"Later I discovered my keycase was gone," Aunt Gertrude finished the story. "He stole it! I know it!"

"But why would anyone want your keys?" Joe asked.

Aunt Gertrude glared at the boy. "Why, indeed? Well, that case contained the keys to my suitcase and a lot of other things."

"But you have your suitcase," Mrs. Hardy said kindly. "Is it locked?"

Her sister-in-law admitted it was. "And now I can't open it. Frank, Joe, I want you to take my bag downtown right away and have another key made for it."

"We'll go to Ben Whittaker's," offered Frank.

"Now mind you, don't let him snoop inside,"

50

The Secret Panel Aunt Gertrude ordered. "Or you, either. Go on now, and don't be long. There are some things in the bag I want to hang up before they have a million wrinkles in them."

Chet had not eaten all he would have liked to, but he thought it wise to leave with the boys. Any moment now, Miss Hardy might start trying to reform his eating habits!

When the three friends arrived at Whittaker's shop, they found the locksmith in a state of anxiety.

"Just the people I want to see!" he cried out. "Boys, Mike Matton hasn't come back. I phoned his house, and they told me that he's moved! Nobody knows where he's gone!"

Frank and Joe were not surprised to hear this, but they were astonished at Ben Whittaker's next announcement. A large quantity of expensive hardware had been taken from the shop!

"Of course you suspect Mike?" Joe asked.

"I'm forced to," the elderly locksmith admitted. "But that's not the worst of it. My reputation is at stake. For forty years I've been in business and no one has ever questioned me before!"

"Is someone doing so now?" Frank asked.

Old Mr. Whittaker nodded. "Mrs. Eccles phoned a few minutes ago. When I told her I couldn't return her antique lock, she was very angry and threatened to notify the police. Why, that's what you do with a common thief!"

Frank suggested that perhaps the woman would A Worried Locksmith 51

think things over, and realize Mr. Whittaker was not responsible for the loss of her valuable lock. To take the worried locksmith's mind off his troubles, Frank showed him Aunt Gertrude's suitcase, and asked him to make a key for

it. With deft fingers the elderly man set about the task. After trying his master keys on the bag, he adjusted his machine to the proper pattern, and clamped in a blank to cut. As the locksmith worked, Frank asked him if he knew John Mead.

"I *did*," Mr. Whittaker replied. "Nice man. Too bad he died."

Chet jumped. "What's that you said, sir? I mean, you're sure?"

"We were told that John Mead was still living," Frank explained.

Ben Whittaker shook his head. "I know better," he said.

"Please tell us about him," Frank requested.

"I know very little about him, except that at one time he was a partner in a big hardware concern in New York," the Bayport locksmith revealed. "Mr. Mead once laughingly told me

he had vowed many years ago to build himself a house without a single lock or keyhole when he was ready to retire. Said he had become so tired of looking at locks he never wanted to see another one in his whole life!"

Ben Whittaker went on to say that he had spent several very pleasant evenings with the retired hardware manufacturer discussing locksmithing prob-52

The Secret Panel lems. John Mead had been extremely clever and inventive, but perhaps a little eccentric.

He had never mentioned having any family, and no will had been found after his death. So far as Whittaker knew, no one had claimed the estate.

"Don't any of the doors inside the house have locks on them?" Chet asked in awe.

"Yes, but they have all been concealed," Ben Whittaker replied. "Well, Frank, here's the suitcase key. Try it out."

The Hardy boy inserted the key in the lock. It fitted perfectly. Joe, who had gone to the rear of the shop, now returned with a telephone directory in his hand. Grinning, he pointed to a certain page and read aloud: " 'John Mead. 22 Beach St.' Guess that's your man, Chet."

Chet Morton was crushed for a moment. Then he said hopefully that it was possible this was the man the Hardy boys had met on the road.

"Why don't you go over to Beach Street and find out?" he urged.

"Not a bad idea," Frank agreed. "Tell you what. Suppose you and Joe do that while I take Aunt Gertrude's suitcase home. I'll meet you at Main and Beach in half an hour with the roadster."

"Okay." Chet felt better. The boy was sure he was about to solve one of the Hardys'

mysteries; in fact, he was so sure of it, he stepped along more jauntily than usual. "It's swell to get a mystery A
Worried Locksmith 53

ft cleared up, isn't it, Joe?" he asked enthusiastically. "Makes a fellow feel good."

Ten minutes later the two boys paused in front of 22 Beach Street, then mounted the steps. Joe rang the bell, and a pleasant-looking woman opened the door.

"Is Mr. Mead at home?" Joe inquired.

"No, not at the moment. I'm Mrs. Mead. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," Joe replied, smiling. "Have you a recent photograph of your husband?"

"So that's it! You're a photographer," Mrs. Mead said. "Well, we don't want any pictures taken!" She started to close the door.

"Oh, that's not it!" cried Chet. "Joe here just wants to look at your husband's picture.

Maybe he knows him. And if he doesn't, then the key isn't yours."

The woman looked blankly at Chet. Whatever was this boy talking about? Joe laughed, explaining that he wanted to find out if the John Mead who lived there was the one he was looking for.

"But, Joe, you said the one you're looking for is dead," Chet interrupted.

Mrs. Mead's face turned pale. Then she asked quickly if something had happened to her husband.

"Oh, I didn't mean to say that," Chet apologized hurriedly. "Joe, you tell her what I mean."

The Hardy boy straightened matters out, and at last poor Mrs. Mead understood why they had come.

The Secret Panel She showed them a photograph of her husband, and Joe shook his head. This was not the man from whom he and Frank had received the key.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you, Mrs. Mead," Joe said. "Well, we'll run along."

On the way back to the corner of Main and Beach streets, Chet was silent for several

minutes. His great idea had fallen completely flat. Under such circumstances the only thing that could revive his spirits was food. Now, as they passed a bakery window, Chet's eyes fell upon a tray of doughnuts. He remembered that he had been unable to finish his good breakfast at the Hardy home.

"Say, Joe," he called suddenly, "we ought to stock up a bit for the job we have to do."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning there's no telling how long we'll have to work, nor how far we may have to go to find the man who sold me the dory," Chet explained. "So-let's get a few doughnuts in here, and maybe a pie-----"

"There's a better bakery in the next block," Joe told his chum, urging him along. "And anyhow, Frank may be waiting."

At the corner stood a covered truck, the rear of which was open. As the boys came abreast of it, Chet let out a yelp.

"It's-it's my man!" he cried. "That truck driver! He's the fellow who sold me the boat!"

The two boys raced into the street and pulled themselves up onto the back of the truck just as the A Worried Locksmith
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traffic light changed. But Chet and Joe had not reckoned with an unseen possibility.

Before they could get their balance, a giant figure suddenly arose from the floor of the dark interior, and two huge fists swung toward them.

An instant later Joe and Chet, powerless to defend themselves, were knocked to the pavement!

CHAPTER VII

The Search

A woman screamed. A car swerved sharply, missing Joe Hardy by inches as he fell sideways from the back of the moving truck. Chet Morton lay in the middle of the street, the breath knocked out of him. Several passers-by rushed to the assistance of the two boys, but they picked themselves up, insisting they were all right.

Frank Hardy, parked at the next corner, saw the crowd gathering. He raced to the scene. Seeing his brother and Chet with a circle of people around them, he pushed his way through to find out what the trouble was. Someone was saying: "Well, you kids are lucky, all right. How that guy kept from running over you is a miracle."

Joe and Chet agreed. They followed Frank along the sidewalk, and tumbled into the roadster. Frank drove off. It was not until then that he heard the full story of what had happened.

"That boat fellow got away," Chet groaned in con-

The Search 57

elusion. "What luck, just when I thought I had him, too!"

"I certainly didn't like his friend in the back of the truck," said Joe. "Wow, he had hands like a gorilla! Don't let him get at your throat if you meet him!"

He then told Frank of their disappointment at the Mead house on Beach Street. Frank in turn brought Chet up to

date on the mystery of the kidnaped doctor, the clue of the humming traffic light, and how Mrs. Fanny Stryker had asked the Hardys to locate her wounded son Lenny.

"Whew!" said Chet. "You fellows certainly have been busy. Where are you off to now?"

"I think we should call on Mrs. Stryker and see if she's heard any more from Lenny," said Frank.

"Good idea," Joe agreed. "Want to trail along, Chet?"

"Sure do, but I'll wait outside while you talk to her."

Frank had been driving along rather aimlessly. Now he headed toward the Stryker apartment, which was located in a shabby neighborhood. The Strykers' quarters were clean and tidy, and Lenny's mother was neatly dressed this morning. Though her eyes were red

from weeping, they lighted up hopefully when she saw the Hardy boys.

"Have you any news for me?" she asked eagerly.

Frank shook his head. "Not much. One little clue, perhaps. A doctor came to our house this morning and said he was kidnaped last night to take 58 The Secret Panel care of a young man who had been shot in the leg."

"He may have been my Lenny!" the woman cried. "Where did the doctor say he is? I've got to get to him at once."

"The doctor couldn't tell us where the patient was. He was blindfolded and taken there in a car. However, he gave us some good clues. Don't worry, Mrs. Stryker, we'll try to find out where your son is and let you know," Frank said kindly.

The Hardys were glad Mrs. Stryker asked no more questions. They thought it best not to divulge too much to her. In the first place, they did not want to speak of their father's suspicion that Lenny might have been mixed up in the museum robbery. Moreover, Doctor Lyall did not want his name made known, or his part in the affair publicized.

"We'll keep you posted on any new developments," the boys promised Mrs. Stryker as they left her apartment.

When they reached the car Chet was not in it, but they spied him at a near-by street intersection. The stout youth was standing perfectly still, looking up intently at the traffic light, his head cocked to one side. When Frank and Joe reached him, he announced there was no noticeable sound to the signal.

"Thanks, Chet," said Joe. "Well, that eliminates one light. Let's investigate some others."

The three boys drove without success from one traffic signal to another. At the corner of Hampton and Liberty streets they found that the light, which The Search 59

was high over the center of the roadway, was not working. Frank, wondering if the trouble might be burned-out bulbs, climbed up on the hood of the car to investigate. As he raised his arms high over his head, a squeaky voice said from the sidewalk: "Well, of all things! What next?"

Frank looked down to see an elderly man leaning on a cane. The stranger gazed disapprovingly at the boy, then vigorously thumped his cane on the pavement.

"You come down, young man!" he said. "Hear me? And leave that light alone or I'll call the police!"

"I'm not doing any harm, sir," said Frank.

"He's just trying to find out if it sings," Chet spoke up.

The old gentleman focused beady eyes on the stocky boy. "Don't be impudent, young man. I'm a public-minded citizen and I won't have any public property tampered with. What's that you say?" he interrupted himself. "A light that sings?"

Frank explained they were hunting for a traffic signal that made a humming sound. The old gentleman looked mystified for a moment. Then he banged his cane several times and finally pointed it at the boys. Forgetting his annoyance completely, he told them where such a light could be found.

"At Fourth and Upton," he said. "Know where that is?"

"Yes, sir," Frank replied, climbing down and getting the Secret Panel tugged back behind the wheel. "Thank you very much, sir. We'll go right over there."

They were off for Fourth and Upton in a jiffy. The old gentleman, suddenly realizing he had not asked why the boys were hunting for a humming light, hobbled up the street after them to find out. But his pace was too slow.

Reaching the intersection, the boys listened attentively to the traffic signal. Yes, the timer inside it made a humming, almost singing sound as the lights changed.

"Now we're getting somewhere!" cried Joe. "Doctor Lyall said he was driven for about

ten minutes from this very spot. Which direction shall we take first?"

It was decided to go north at the rate of thirty miles an hour, as Doctor Lyall had suggested. Joe kept his eye on his watch, while Frank took note of stores and houses on the left. Chet watched the right-hand side of the road.

"Stop!" cried Joe at the end of ten minutes.

Chet's face broke into a broad smile, for they had stopped directly in front of a roadside restaurant. "Well, fellows," he said, "you two can go hunting for kidnaping gangsters and secret panels all you like. I'm going to eat!"

A sign advertising lunches and dinners swung in front of a small white cottage. Flowered curtains hung at the windows and a rosebush was in bloom outside the door.

The Search 61

"Doesn't look like a hangout for racketeers," said Joe, disappointed.

Frank pointed out that the attractive front might be only a blind for sinister doings within.

He insisted they should find this out, adding: "Guess we all could eat, anyway. Let's go inside."

The cottage door was locked, so Chet pushed the doorbell. Several minutes went by before anyone came to answer it. Then a white-haired woman opened the door a few inches.

"Sorry, but lunch won't be ready till twelve o'clock," she said crisply.

"But I'm starved, madam," Chet protested.

The woman repeated her remark, and Frank felt she was only making an excuse to keep visitors out, at least for the time being. He was determined to get in and look around, so he smiled at her disarmingly and said: "I ought to telephone and tell Mother we'll not be home to lunch," he said. "Do you mind if I use your phone?"

There was a moment of suspense as the boys waited for the woman's answer. Would they get in to investigate or not? Finally she opened the door.

"All right," she said. "Come on in."

The woman explained that she never unlocked the door to strangers until her helpers came, because she once had been robbed while alone.

"You know," she said, "everybody eats, even thieves. I have to be careful who I let in."

62 The Secret Panel She prepared a delicious meal for the boys, while they looked around. They saw everything, even the basement, for the woman proudly showed them her preserve closet.

There was nothing the least bit suspicious in the house. As the boys were driving away some time later, Chet, almost too full to speak, congratulated Frank on his cleverness in getting them into the roadside restaurant.

"Only our stop there didn't net us anything except a good meal," the Hardy boy reminded him.

He drove back to the humming traffic light, then headed in a westerly direction. At the end of ten minutes, the boys came to a ball field. They returned once more to the signal, and

Joe pointed out that the easterly direction would take them directly to the bay.

"Our last chance to find out where Doctor Lyall was taken is to drive south," Joe remarked.

As they reached a congested business section of Bayport ten minutes later, Frank suggested they separate. "Joe, suppose you take this avenue. I'll go over to Wallace. Chet, how about you taking Ferry Street?"

Chet started off enthusiastically, but after being shooed out of a laundry, icily dismissed from a beauty parlor, and practically thrown out of a soda bottling factory, he was ready to quit. He walked back to the car. Joe, who had had no better luck, was waiting for him.

The Search 68

"Frank must be on a hot trail," Joe decided, when half an hour went by and his brother had not returned.

At that very moment Frank was hiding in the dimly lighted cellar of a warehouse. He had followed a tip given to him by a small boy that rough-looking men had been seen going to and from the warehouse with odd-shaped packages at all hours of the day and night.

Frank was watching a man who had just stepped from a freight elevator. Reaching the far wall of the cellar, the operator leaned down and evidently worked a catch. A large door slid open and the man disappeared beyond it. He returned almost immediately, however, closed the door, and went back to the elevator.

Frank Hardy came out of his hiding place and approached the mysterious sliding door.

He found the catch, and slowly pushed against it with his knee. The door opened. The place beyond was in total darkness.

Whipping out his flashlight, Frank turned its beam on the mysterious room. Then he muttered in disgust, and quickly making his way from the building, returned to the car.

"Did you find anything?" Joe asked him eagerly.

"Yes. A huge refrigerator! It was empty except for the elevator operator's lunch!"

The others laughed when Frank related how he 64 The Secret Panel had thought Lenny Stryker was hidden in the warehouse, and the elevator operator was taking food to him.

"So I investigated, but found nothing more suspicious than an icebox," he concluded.

"Golly, that reminds me. I have to buy some meat to take home," Chet said, looking at his watch. "I'd better go. That is, if you're through work," he added.

Frank sighed. "The humming signal clue seems to have petered out," he declared. "I guess there's no use doing any more about it now."

The Hardys offered to drive Chet home, but he insisted on taking the bus. He said good-bye to the brothers, who headed for home. Joe had an idea.

"It's still early and I'm fearfully hot, Frank. What say we go for a swim and combine a little business with pleasure?"

"What's on your mind?"

"How about diving for Mr. Mead's key?"

"Swell. We'll stop at the house and get our suits."

Frank parked the car in front of the Hardy home instead of going into the garage. Aunt Gertrude, sitting in the porch swing, remarked about this at once. She wanted to know where the boys were headed, and why. Joe's reply that they were working on a mystery satisfied her for the moment. But when they could not find their swim trunks, and had to ask Miss Hardy about them because their mother was out, she eyed her nephews distrustfully.

The Search 65

"Whoever heard of solving a mystery in a bathing suit!" she scoffed. "I declare, what excuses boys won't think of nowadays!"

"Didn't boys used to think?" Joe asked mischievously.

"You know what I mean, Joe Hardy, and don't try to pull the wool over my eyes. You're not going to solve a mystery, you just want to go swimming. Why didn't you say so in the first place? Well, I have other plans for you."

The boys wilted. They knew from experience that their aunt probably was going to ask them to clean up their workshop or go on some errand for her.

"Please, Auntie," Frank pleaded, "we aren't going swimming for pleasure. There's a clue to a mystery at the bottom of

Barmet Bay. It's very necessary that we do some diving and try to find it."

Aunt Gertrude sniffed, unbelieving. "Sounds funny to me. What is it you want to dive for?"

"A key."

Miss Hardy fixed a steady eye on her nephews. It is doubtful that she ever would have told them where their bathing suits were. Luckily, their mother returned at that moment and found their trunks.

Frank drove to the boathouse where the *Sleuth* was tied up. He and Joe hung their clothes on hooks, donned their trunks, and headed the *Sleuth* out into Barmet Bay. It took the boys some time to 66 The Secret Panel locate the spot where Chet's ill-fated boat had gone down.

"I'll go over first," Frank offered.

He made a clean, deep dive from the stern of the *Sleuth*. Joe watched the spot where his brother had gone down. When more than a minute went by and there was no sign of Frank, he became concerned.

Joe leaned far over the side of the boat and looked down through the water. Then he stood up and studied the surface of the bay. His brother was not in sight. The boy's heart began to pound in terror.

What had happened to Frank?

CHAPTER VIII

The Curious Symbol

joe hardy dived into the water. He went straight to the bottom. Then, hoping against hope, the worried boy looked around for his brother.

Where was Frank?

Swimming under water until he thought his lungs would burst, Joe finally had to come to the surface. He looked around. Still he did not see Frank. Sick at heart, he climbed into the Sleuth and again gazed about him.

Suddenly his pulses quickened. Weren't those two arms he saw at a distance, alternately cleaving the water? As the swimmer drew closer, Joe could see his head. Frank!

Panting, the older boy grabbed at the side of the boat.

"Gee, I'm glad you're okay," said Joe. "You gave me an awful scare. I went down to look for you. Where've you been?"

"I-saw-a-whale!" Frank gasped.

"A whale? Never heard of them in Barmet Bay," Joe said, astounded. Then, after helping Frank 67

68 The Secret Panel aboard, he added with a grin, "Did he swallow you? You stayed away long enough!"

"Don't-blame-you-for thinking so," Frank replied.

He went on to say that he had noticed the whale, or perhaps a submarine, making great speed through the water some

distance away.

"What were you doing so far from here?" Joe asked.

"The dory below us isn't Chet's," his brother told him. "So I swam around trying to find it.

Guess I came up for air when you dived for me. I went farther than I realized. Sorry I worried you."

"Forget it. Did you see the *Bloodhound*?"

"No, but I'm sure it's somewhere near here."

Joe started the engine of the *Sleuth*. Frank gazed down through the water as they made way slowly. No sunken boat was visible.

"Guess we'll have to give it up," he sighed. "Well, no one can say we didn't try. I sure wish I hadn't lost Mr. Mead's key. If he should-hey, hold it, Joe!"

"See something?" Joe cut the motor.

Both boys leaned over the side of the *Sleuth*. Below them, on the bottom of Barmet Bay, lay a dory. It was impossible from the surface to identify it as Chet's, but hopefully Frank dived into the water. Half a minute later he reappeared, reporting that it was indeed the Bloodhound, but that he had not found the lost key.

The Curious Symbol 69

"I'll take a try," Joe offered.

He had no better luck. After talking the matter over, the brothers concluded that they

would never find the key in this hit-and-miss manner, so they proceeded to map out a scheme for the search. It was decided that Frank would hunt around the fore part of the sunken dory, while Joe would take the aft section.

"Then we'll try midships and the engine," the older youth suggested.

The brothers took turns. Their first endeavors brought no results, and Frank's attempt at the middle part of the *Bloodhound* did not yield the key, either. The boys knew that if it had fallen into the sand there would be no chance of finding it. The area around the engine was their last hope. Joe shot down through the water and grasped the flywheel of the dory's motor. Feeling around quickly with his free hand, he came upon something wedged tightly between the engine and a crossbeam. Pulling it out, he swam quickly to the surface.

"You found it!" Frank yelled excitedly.

It was the missing key, indeed. Joe was all for going at once to the Mead house to try it, but his brother reminded him they had promised their father they would not enter the place without a police escort.

Joe was impatient, but agreed with Frank. He suggested they hurry back at once for their clothes, find their father and see if he would change his mind*

70 The Secret Panel Frank, however, continued to gaze down through the water.

"I think I'll dive in once more," he said. "I'm sure the fellow who took Chet's good money for that old tub down there isn't going to show up with the owner's papers. Maybe we can find some identification on the boat."

"Good idea," Joe admitted. "You swim along one side, and I'll take the other. Suppose I go first."

Joe found nothing, so Frank went over. A few seconds later he came to the surface, his eyes shining.

"A mark is carved on the gunwale," he said excitedly. "It looks exactly like that strange open-faced Y we saw on John Mead's ring!"

"Honest?" Joe yelled. He was over the side in a flash to look at the crudely carved mark himself. He came up, climbed into the *Sleuth*, and started the motor, saying they must do something about this clue at once.

"But what?" Frank asked. "From Chet's description I'm sure the man who sold him the boat isn't the same person we met on the road. Remember, Chet said he was a stocky man of thirty who didn't smile. That doesn't fit John Mead."

Joe had to admit this was true. But the boy longed for action of some kind, and sent the *Sleuth* skimming across the water at a fast clip. Reaching the boathouse, he scrambled into his clothes, urged Frank to hurry, and then drove home at once. He immediately went to the telephone and called Chet The Curious Symbol 71

Morton to ask him if he had heard from the former owner of the *Bloodhound*. The stout boy ruefully admitted that he had not.

"I'm afraid I got gypped," Chet said sadly. "So you fellows will have to keep on looking for him."

"*We?*" Joe exploded. "What's the matter with *you?*"

"Well, what's the use of having friends if you can't call on 'em for help once in a while?"

Chet asked.

"Okay," Joe laughed. "I just wanted to be sure you still needed us. We picked up a clue for you."

"You did?"

Joe told about the odd mark on the dory, and the fact it seemed to be the same as the Y

on John Mead's ring. Chet was amazed, but could not figure any connection. He confirmed the fact the fellow who had sold him the old dory and John Mead could not be the same person.

"But maybe they both belong to the same secret society, and the funny Y is their

insignia," Chet suggested.

"Maybe," agreed Joe soberly.

He had hardly hung up the telephone when it started to ring. It was a long-distance call from Mr. Hardy. The detective said he would not be home that night; he was following a new lead on the museum robberies.

"How are you boys making out?" he asked.

Joe related the day's events, admitting that, up to the moment, the clues they had run down had

72 The Secret Panel brought no results. His father took a different view, however, saying the elimination of false clues was a battle half won.

"Don't be discouraged, son," he advised. "And ask Chief Collig for permission to go into the Mead house alone if he can't send a man with you. I venture to say if you keep trying you'll find a keyhole somewhere. And now put your mother on the wire."

The boys waited until Mrs. Hardy had finished speaking, then told her where they were going. She asked her sons to be home by dinnertime.

"We'll be back by then," the brothers promised.

They went off in their roadster, drawing up in front of Police Headquarters several minutes later. Chief Collig, just coming out, walked up to them and started speaking at once.

"No, there haven't been any new crimes reported," he said briskly. The Hardys thought they detected a note of sarcasm in his voice. "Not a thing. No more doctors kidnaped, no hardware thieves caught."

"Oh!" said both boys. Then Frank grinned and added, "We've come to ask you a favor."

Collig was suspicious, but he relaxed when they told him of their desire to visit the Mead premises. The Chief said he could not spare any men to accompany them, but that it would be all right for the boys to go alone.

The Curious Symbol 73

"But how are you goin' to get in?" he asked. "Riley said there weren't any keyholes at the house. Queer place, I'd say."

Without mentioning that the key to the house had been lost and then recovered, Joe said they had found the answer to Collig's question at the bottom of Barmet Bay. The Chief

looked at them hard. Then, muttering something about kids these days being awfully flip in their remarks, he went off.

"Now that we're on our own, let's hurry," Joe urged Frank, who was at the wheel.

Though the Mead mansion was not many miles from the center of Bayport, it seemed to the eager boys to be a long way off. They made the distance in good time, however, and pulled into the driveway. The grounds appeared to be deserted.

"Suppose we take different doors to work on," Joe suggested. He happened to be carrying the key. "I'll go around to the bay side. You take the front door."

Joe hurried to the ornate door which faced the water, and surveyed its uniquely carved design critically. He felt sure that a keyhole was hidden somewhere in the carving. The Hardy boy began to inspect it closely.

He started at the right-hand side of the door, pushing at each ridge of the symmetrical design. His search yielded nothing. He tried the opposite side of the door, still without success.

74 The Secret Panel "Guess I'll start at the very top and work down," Joe concluded. "This door just *has* to have a keyhole."

For half an hour he pushed and pulled, growing more puzzled each minute. Finally he tried combinations with both hands on sections of the raised design. Suddenly his efforts were rewarded. Two pieces of molding shifted. One of them revealed a keyhole!

Excitedly Joe tried to insert the key. His face clouded; it did not fit. The disappointment he felt lasted only a moment, however. Certain now that the other doors had keyholes in

them, he raced toward the front of the house and broke his news to Frank.

The older boy, who had found nothing yet, became hopeful. Feverishly he once more went over the intricate design of the front door. The upper and lower halves of this door were outlined with a wide border, each of them containing an inset. At first glance the upper inset looked like a huge turtle. Joe, standing at a little distance, suddenly had an idea.

"Say, Frank, that turtle's appendages are almost like the strange Y we've been seeing so often lately!" he cried out.

Frank stepped back a few yards. "You're right," he said excitedly. "The two front feet and the right hind one do form sort of a Y. Wonder if there's any significance to it."

The Curious Symbol 75

As Frank started his investigation again, he accidentally pressed the palm of his left hand against the arched back of the turtle. Suddenly the reptile's right hind foot moved to the side, revealing a large keyhole.

"Look!" Frank yelled. He took the key from Joe and inserted it into the keyhole. "It fits!"

he cried a moment later.

Holding his breath, he turned the key. A clicking sound! Since there was no knob, Frank used the key to pull the

heavy door toward him. It swung outward on hidden, noiseless hinges.

The two Hardy boys stepped over the threshold of the Mead mansion!

CHAPTER IX

Joe Is Missing

when the boys' eyes became accustomed to the dimness of the shuttered house, Frank and Joe gazed around. They were in a large entrance hall, heavily carpeted and richly furnished. The walls were solidly paneled in carved wood.

Slowly the brothers went from room to room, peering through the open doorways.

Library, living room, dining room-all were tastefully decorated. But the furniture was dark and massive, producing a gloomy, weird effect.

"There's no light on down here," said Joe as they reached the kitchen. "If Mr. Mead, or whoever that man on the road was, left one burning, it wasn't on this floor."

"Who *was* that man on the road?" Frank speculated. "Now that we know the key he had fits this house, it makes things more mysterious than ever."

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Joe Is Missing 77

"You're right," Joe agreed. Idly he touched an electric switch on the wall. The room suddenly was filled with light. Both boys jumped. "The current's on!" Joe cried out.

"But it isn't supposed to be!" Frank said. "There's something funny about this. Why would the power company leave the

current turned on in a house that has been closed for five years?"

The boys did not speculate about this very long, because their attention was drawn to the doors and windows. There was not a sign of hardware on any of them. Locks, latches, bolts, hinges-all were ingeniously concealed.

"Let's look at the rest of the house," suggested Joe, snapping off the light.

Frank had become intrigued by the library with its huge fireplace and its hundreds of books. Since he wanted to pause and look at them, Joe said he would go upstairs alone to see if any lights were on.

"Locks and Keys, by John Mead," Frank read, taking down one of the volumes from a shelf.

A picture of the author in the front of the book did not look at all like the man the boys had met on the road. Frank decided the author must be the deceased owner of the house.

There was nothing in the volume which told how to install invisible hardware.

The Hardy boy found another book on the history of locks and keys, which looked so fascinating that

78 The Secret Panel he turned on a reading lamp and sat down in an armchair to glance through the volume.

He became completely absorbed in the subject, learning first that in Biblical times keys were made of wood and were so heavy they had to be carried over one's shoulder; that later the makers of metal keys received the name of *locksmith*

because actually they were blacksmiths who forged keys; and that the invention of truly burglarproof locks is barely a hundred years old. Frank was interrupted by a distant voice saying: "We'd better go now."

"All right, Joe. Just a minute," he called.

But the minute dragged into five, and might have been even longer, but for the fact that the lamplight suddenly went out.

Frank got up and went to the hall. He clicked on the switch, but this time the center light did not flash on.

"That's funny," the boy thought. "Main fuse must have blown out. Hey, Joe!" Frank called loudly up the dark stairway. "Joe!"

There was no reply. Frank concluded his brother must have gone outside. When he endeavored to open the front door, he discovered he did not know how. Playing his flashlight on the carved design, the Hardy boy finally figured out the reverse action of the turtle's body, and went outside.

Joe was not around the house, so Frank hurried to the roadster. His brother was not there, either.

Joe Is Missing 79

After looking around the grounds, going as far as the waterfront, the youth decided that Joe must be inside the house, after all.

This was true, and besides, Joe was in difficulty. Not having found a light burning upstairs, he had paused in a den to look at some hunting trophies which hung on the walls.

Switching on a lamp, he gazed in admiration at several fine specimens of moose head, deer antlers and a buffalo head. In moving about, the boy accidentally closed the door leading into the hall. It locked!

"That was stupid of me," he muttered.

He had barely begun to look for the combination to open it, when the light went out.

Unfortunately he had no flashlight and could not see the design on the door well enough to work on it. Hurrying to one of the shuttered windows, through which rays of sunshine filtered, Joe lifted the sash.

"Well, that's a break," he thought.

Getting the shutters open was another matter. Though no fastener was visible, they were locked. Joe ran his fingers over the surface hunting for a secret spring, but he found none.

Next he took a penknife from his pocket and inserted one of its blades in the crack between the two shutters. Suddenly there was a click, and they opened.

Looking out, he saw his brother on the ground below him. "Hi, Frank!" he yelled.

The older boy looked up in amazement. "So that's where you are! I've been looking everywhere 80 The Secret Panel for you. We'd better go home now or Aunt Gertrude will be furious. You know we promised to be home in time for dinner."

"I can't get out," said Joe.

"What do you mean?"

Joe leaned from the window and surveyed the wall of the house. There was no possible way for him to climb down, and the drop was too far to be made safely.

"The door to this room is locked!" he explained to Frank. "I'll try it again, though.

Suppose you come up and see if you can open it."

Frank re-entered the house and quickly found the door to the room where Joe was imprisoned. He played his flashlight over the panels, taking in every detail of the unique

climbing vine pattern. There was no clue as to where the lock was hidden.

By this time the Hardy boys had learned there apparently were no rules to go by in opening the Mead doors. The hidden locks might be found almost anywhere. Frank pushed and pulled at each leaf of the design. Finally his efforts were rewarded. One of the leaves moved aside, revealing a small latch, which he lifted with his fingers, and the door opened.

"Whew! I'm glad to be out of that place," Joe said in relief. "What happened to the lights?" he asked.

"I don't know, unless a fuse blew out."

As Joe followed his brother from the house, he asked what Frank had found in the library.

Joe Is Missing 81

i "Some excellent books about locks and keys," was the reply. "One by John Mead. I'll tell you about them as we drive along."

Joe listened to Frank attentively, and made no comment until his brother said that he was sorry to have been interrupted in his reading. Joe inquired who had interrupted him.

"You."

"Me? How did I interrupt you?"

"When you said we'd better go."

Joe turned and stared at his brother. "I never said that," he replied in surprise.

It was Frank's turn to be puzzled. He was positive someone had said those words. Both boys concluded either that Frank had thought he heard someone speak, or else someone had been talking to another person in the house.

"But why didn't they let us know they were there?" asked Joe.

"Search me," Frank shrugged. "Say," he added, as a thought came to him, "maybe they turned out the lights."

Joe conceded that Frank's guess was a shrewd one. He could not figure out, however, why anyone who might have been there for a legitimate reason did not inquire what the boys were doing in the house. And if the persons had no right inside the place, why should one of them have spoken and given away his presence?

Frank, lost in thought, almost failed to stop at a 82 The Secret Panel traffic light which changed rather abruptly, but he jammed on the brakes just in time to keep from crossing the intersection. Neither of the boys spoke as they waited for the signal.

Then, as it changed from red to yellow and then to green, Joe gave a yelp.

"It hums! It sings!" he cried out. "Maybe this is the light Doctor Lyall meant!"

CHAPTER X

The First Break

joe excitedly suggested that they start out at once and drive ten minutes in various directions to try to locate the place where Doctor Lyall had been taken -the place where they perhaps might find the wounded Lenny Stryker. Frank Hardy looked at his brother.

"I'm with you, if you can stand Aunt Gertrude's wrath," he laughed.

"It won't take long," Joe stated, adding, "We can't go east because of the bay. Let's save the direction toward town till last. We can look around there after dinner."

"Good idea," Frank agreed, turning the car toward the west. "Let's see what's down this road."

As a matter of fact, there was very little to see. It was a farming section, and there was nothing to indicate a crooks' hide-out. In exactly ten minutes, Frank stopped in front of a small house where a ferocious watchdog was tied up. Joe jumped out of the car and tried to get to the front porch. The un-83

84 The Secret Panel friendly dog would not allow this. He set up a terrific barking, which finally brought a man

from the rear of the farmhouse.

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly.

Joe found it hard to explain why he and his brother had stopped, so he asked what breed the dog was. The farmer refused to answer, and again repeated his question. As the boy hesitated, the man said suddenly: "I don't like snoopy people. Get out of here or I'll set the dog on you!"

The Hardys were suspicious of him because of his manner, but at this moment the front door opened and a sweet but dejected-looking woman appeared with two small children.

She smiled wanly at Joe, then looked at the farmer.

"Please, Jonathan," she pleaded, "don't be so harsh. This boy hasn't done anything."

She looked at Joe. "Can I help you?" she asked.

The boy was sure this could not be the place to which Doctor Lyall had been taken. He mumbled some excuse about being interested in dogs, and asked the woman what kind hers was.

Before she could reply, the farmer ordered her into the house. In the next breath the angry man commanded the dog to spring on Joe. But the Hardy boy outguessed him and dodged just in time. The youth raced to the car and jumped in.

"That guy ought to be put in a cage with some lions!" Frank stormed, as he drove off.

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"Lions with big teeth!" Joe panted.

The boys returned to the humming light intersection and then headed north. Five minutes later they passed the Mead

property and gazed intently into the grounds. There was not a sign of anyone about. In another five minutes they reached a tiny settlement which consisted of a general store, a garage, a church and a few houses. Frank stopped the car.

"A peaceful enough looking place," he remarked. "I wonder if we'll find a clue here."

The brothers decided to tackle Bilks' Garage first. Inside the barnlike building, a young man who did not appear to be very bright was washing a car. As a sudden thought came to Frank, he asked the youth whether he had changed a tire a few days before for a Mr. Mead.

"Dunno. I change a lot of tires."

"The one I mean was a front wheel," said Frank, trying to jog the young man's memory. .

"Don't remember," was the laconic reply.

"Where's your boss?" Joe spoke up.

"Dunno."

The Hardys were becoming exasperated. Thinking they might wake up the dull fellow, Frank told him about the wheel coming off Mr. Mead's car and how it nearly caused an accident.

"Are you sure you don't know a Mr. Mead?"

"Nope."

While Joe endeavored to find out who lived in the town, and whether any strangers had moved in

86 The Secret Panel lately, Frank wandered into the office of the garage. His gaze fell upon a handsomely bound book which lay on the desk. It seemed so out of place there that he picked it up and glanced inside. A notation pasted on the flyleaf quickened his pulses.

Property of Hamilton Museum.

This was one of the museums which had been robbed recently! Frank instantly recalled two significant facts. This garage was only a five-minute run from the Mead home. The man on the road who called himself John Mead said he had had a wheel changed by a stupid boy!

Hurrying back into the garage with the book in his hand, Frank asked whose property it was. The helper replied that someone had dropped the book there, but would say no more.

Fortunately the owner of the garage came down the street at this moment. Mr. Bilks was more cooperative. He told the Hardy boys that some men had stopped for gasoline a few days before. After they had driven off, he had found the book on the ground.

"Do you know what this book is?" Frank asked him excitedly.

"I tried to read a little of it," Mr. Bilks grinned, "but it was beyond me. Ain't even written in English, is it?"

Frank smiled and told the man the book was in Latin. The boy went on to say that the

volume was

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very old and rare, and had been stolen recently from the Hamilton Museum.

"You mean it's worth a lot of money?" the startled man blinked.

"I believe so," Frank replied. "I think you ought to turn it over to the constable and have him put it in a safe."

"I sure will," Mr. Bilks answered quickly. Then, as a thought struck him, he asked, "Those men that stopped for gas-were they thieves?"

"They probably were," Joe answered, "and if any of them come back here be sure to call the police."

Mr. Bilks promised to follow Joe's suggestion. Then he went to the telephone and asked the constable to come over at once. When the officer appeared, the Hardy boys had a long talk with him and endeavored to find out if there was any spot in the village where the thieves might be hiding.

The constable, a Mr. Pickens, assured the boys he knew every hole and corner in the town. He said that there certainly were no gangsters living there. The man rather pompously suggested that he would not allow such a thing.

"Of course not," Frank agreed. "I'd like to ask you one more question. My brother and I heard recently about a room without windows which you enter through a secret panel. Do you know of any such room around here?"

The officer looked intently at the youth, saying rather tartly he knew every inch of the town. There 88 The Secret Panel was no secret panel in it. Confident that there were no more clues to be picked up which might lead to Lenny Stryker or the hide-out of the museum thieves, Frank turned the car about and sped back toward Bayport.

Joe counted the minutes after they passed the humming signal light again. Ten minutes later Frank stopped in one of the residential sections of the town. They decided to wait until after dinner to investigate the area. It was lucky that they did so, because when they reached home Aunt Gertrude was putting the finishing touches to dinner and insisted it be eaten at once. When the meal was over, and her nephews announced they were going out to do a little more sleuthing, Aunt Gertrude sniffed.

"The idea! When I was your age, I was in bed by nine o'clock!"

"What a lot you must have missed," remarked Joe teasingly. "Or maybe nothing happened after nine o'clock when you were our age."

"Plenty happened," said his aunt. "But decent folks had nothing to do with it. They got their sleep. I declare, I don't know what the present generation is coming to. They'll all be nervous wrecks before they're thirty!"

Aunt Gertrude might have said more, but the boys hurried from the house and went back to the section which was ten minutes' drive from the humming traffic light. After spending twenty minutes walking around and making inquiries, the Hardys were sure The First Break 89

this was not the place to which Doctor Lyall had been taken.

"What say we run out to Chet's?" Joe suggested. "We could do that and even be in bed by nine o'clock," he grinned.

"And if one lola Morton should coax you to stay longer you might even forget to be home by nine o'clock," Frank teased his brother.

"Oh, cut it out," said Joe, turning red. He was very fond of Chet's sister, although he

would not admit it.

When the brothers reached the Morton farm Chet's mother and sister came out to the front porch and greeted the Hardys rather excitedly. Mrs. Morton said her son had been trying to get them on the telephone before leaving the house, but that he had been unable to wait.

"What's up?" Joe inquired.

"I don't know exactly," lola replied. "Chet was kind of mysterious."

"Yes, and very excited too," Mrs. Morton added. "He didn't say much, but was eager to get in touch with you boys."

"Where is he now?"

"Well, I'm not sure," their stout chum's mother answered. "But he did say that we should keep on trying to get hold of you two boys and, if we did, to ask you to come to 47 Packer Street."

The Hardys had never heard of 47 Packer Street. Neither Mrs. Morton nor lola could tell them why

90 The Secret Panel Chet had gone to the address. He merely had said it was very important that he go there at once. He was to meet a man on some special business in which the Hardys were concerned.

"Chet didn't mention the kind of business?" Joe asked Mrs. Morton.

"No, he didn't. I got an idea it was some kind of ease you're working on."

"We'd better get going," Frank urged his brother.

The Hardys jumped into their roadster, bade Mrs. Morton and her daughter a hasty good-bye, and drove off quickly. They wondered what was up. Had Chet got on the trail of the man who had sold him the battered boat? Or had he somehow picked up a clue to the whereabouts of Lenny Stryker or the museum thieves?

CHAPTER XI

Trapped!

packer street was narrow. It led to Bayport's waterfront. A street lamp revealed Number 47 as a dilapidated house.

"Do you suppose this is the place Chet meant?" Frank asked his brother, surveying the closed windows and drawn shades.

"It sure seems funny," said Joe. "I don't like it."

The Hardy boys got out of their roadster and gazed about, but Chet did not put in an appearance. As the brothers were wondering what to do, a short, stocky man walked slowly up the alleyway from the back of the house. Joe nudged his brother and whispered: "Look! I'll bet he's the man who sold Chet the boat."

"Could be," Frank agreed in a low voice, realizing the description given by the stout boy fitted the stranger perfectly.

On impulse Joe accosted the man as he reached 91

92 The Secret Panel the sidewalk. The boy said he was looking for a friend of his and wondered if the stranger had seen him around. The man shook his head.

"Haven't seen anybody. Been too busy." He started up the street.

"We were to meet him here," Frank spoke up, detaining the stocky fellow. "Are you sure he didn't come to this house?"

Frank's eyes bored into the stranger.

The man looked intently at Frank, then asked why the boys were meeting their friend at this place. Taking a shot in the dark, Frank replied that it was because they were trying to find the person who had sold Chet a dory.

"And we think you're that person!" Joe added.

The Hardys expected the man to deny the accusation, but to their surprise he burst into laughter. "Oh, so that's it," he said. "Sure I sold your friend a boat. And I've been trying ever

since to find him. I want to get it back."

"You-you want to get it back?" Frank cried in amazement.

The stocky stranger, an innocent look on his face, seemed surprised at the boy's question. "What's the matter with that?" he said. "I never should have sold it to him in the first place. And I'll pay him a handsome profit to get it back, too. Where can I find him?"

For a moment the brothers had no answer. Then their suspicions were aroused anew.

There was

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something very funny about this whole business. They were sure Chet had given his name and address to the man.

"Well, where is your friend?" the man repeated.

"I don't know," Frank replied evenly. "But we'll give him your message when we see him."

Where can Chet get in touch with you?"

The fellow gave a start but recovered his poise immediately. "Come into the house and I'll get you one of my cards," he invited.

Frank and Joe looked at each other. Was all this on the level, or were they walking into a trap? Whispering into Joe's ear in a barely audible voice, Frank warned: "Watch your step!"

They followed the man up the porch and into the hall. He snapped on a flashlight and apologized for the condition of the house, saying his furniture at the moment consisted only of the pieces in his office at the rear. Keeping their ears tuned for any unusual sounds, Frank and Joe followed the man down the hall, and waited as he unlocked a door.

"The light's on the other side of the room," the stranger said, opening the door.

As the boys strained their eyes to see into the dark room, two fists suddenly shot out, catching each of them under the chin. Taken off guard, the brothers lost their balance and sprawled on the floor.

The door was slammed shut and locked from the outside. Hasty footsteps retreated up the hallway 94 The Secret Panel and the front door was closed swiftly. The stocky stranger smiled and muttered to himself.

"That'll take care of those fresh kids for a while. I suppose they'll get out of that place, but not before I finish that little job I have in mind!"

In the dark back room Frank Hardy sat up and rubbed his chin ruefully.

"Joe, are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, Frank. And you?"

"I'm all right. But that sure was some wallop. Gosh, we're saps!"

"I'll say we are. I----- "

Just then there came a loud groan from someone else in the room. Chills ran down the spines of the Hardy boys.

Frank got up, and though still a little groggy from the blow he had received, felt around for his flashlight, which had dropped from his pocket. At last he located it and snapped on the light. In the corner of the room lay Chet Morton, bound and gagged! The boy's eyes were closed.

"Chet!" yelled the brothers, and hurried to his side.

Quickly they pulled the handkerchief from his mouth, untied the cords which bound his wrists and ankles, and rubbed them vigorously. Chet soon regained consciousness.

"Wh-where am I?" he gasped. Then, recognizing the Hardys, he added, "Thank goodness you came."

"Tell us what happened," Joe demanded.

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Frank said he thought they ought to get out of the house before hearing Chet's story. At

any instant the stocky stranger might return and even bring some pals with him!

But getting out of the room was not so easy as it seemed. Its one window was high up, and apparently the lock was rusted shut. The only other exit to the room was through the door to the hall. Frank and Joe threw their weight against the door, and a few seconds later the upper half of it gave way. Joe reached his hand through to feel for a key in the lock but there was none. Another heave against the door, however, and there was an opening large enough for the three boys to crawl through. Helping Chet to the front entrance, they left the house.

The street was quiet. No one was in sight. The Hardys knew it would be hopeless to try pursuing the stranger, so they headed for the Morton farm. On the way Chet told them he had received a mysterious telephone call. He had been warned that the speaker would not take "No" for an answer. Chet was to go at once to 47 Packer Street to see about the dory he had bought.

"When I got there that man said he wanted the boat back right away," Chet related. "At first I didn't let him know it was at the bottom of the bay."

"What did you tell him?" Joe asked.

"I said I didn't want to sell it. At that the fellow glared at me and said I certainly *was* going to sell it back to him.

96 The Secret Panel "He tried to stick some money in my hand and I didn't know what to do. I was hoping you fellows would come to help me out, so I kept putting him off. He got madder by the minute."

"What was he m£d about?" Frank asked, perplexed.

Chet shrugged. "I don't know. But finally I had to tell him the dory had sunk, and, boy, did he rave! He stomped around

the room like a mad bull. I tried to get out but he had locked the door. Finally he yelled that he would fix me, and the next thing I knew, he gave me a terrific wallop on the head. Gosh, it still hurts!"

Frank and Joe promised Chet they would renew their efforts to find the fellow. Now that they had met him face to face, it would be easier for them.

After reporting the affair to the police, the Hardys drove on to their own home. They discussed the strange affair from every angle, but came to no conclusion. Why had the man gone to the trouble of enticing them into the empty house when it would have been so much easier for him to have let them go?

Mrs. Hardy and Aunt Gertrude had retired. The boys were just ready for bed when they heard their father's key in the front door.

"Let's go talk to him," Joe urged his brother, and ran down the stairs. "Hello, Dad! How did you make out?" he asked eagerly.

The famous detective said he was a bit discouraged
Trapped!

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so far as the museum robberies were concerned, but he was working on a new angle which might lead somewhere. It had to do with fingerprints.

"And now, boys, suppose you tell me what you've been doing. I can see by your eyes that there's something important in the wind." He led his sons into the den.

It took some time for Frank and Joe to relate their experiences after finding the humming traffic light: the strange happenings at the Mead home; the book from the Hamilton Museum, which they had found in the garage and turned over to the constable; Chet's adventure and their own part in the happenings at 47 Packer Street. Mr. Hardy rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"One thing is sure," he said. "Something made that man change his mind about the boat. You say it was an old tub and Chet paid him a good price for it. He wouldn't want it back except for a very good reason."

"Maybe it was because of that locked box in the bow," suggested Frank.

"Possibly," Mr. Hardy replied. "But I'd be more inclined to think someone else is

demanding the boat."

"You mean the owner?" Joe inquired.

"That might be. Especially if the fellow stole it. But there may be even more behind it than that."

Mr. Hardy thought the strange open-faced Y carved on the gunwale of the sunken dory might be

98 The Secret Panel the clue to the answer. After discussing the matter for some time, he decided it would be a good idea to raise the boat and examine it thoroughly.

"I believe the Bayport Salvage Company wouldn't charge much to do the work," the detective said. "Go over there tomorrow and ask for Mr. Redfield. Tell him I sent you."

Before going to bed, the two boys and their father went out to the kitchen for a snack.

While they were eating, Mr. Hardy told his sons he was grateful to them for finding the book which had been stolen from the Hamilton Museum. First thing in the morning he would drive to the little settlement where the constable was holding it, and compare the fingerprints on the book with some specimens he had taken from the glass cases at the Hamilton Museum.

"And now this weary man is going to bed."

At seven o'clock the next morning the Hardys were awakened by the persistent ringing of the frontdoor bell. Each member of the family appeared in the upper hallway, but Joe was first down the stairs to see who the caller might be. He opened the door to admit an excited young man.

"Is Mr. Hardy at home?" he asked, out of breath.

The detective hurried down the stairs. The man, who introduced himself as Doctor Mills, explained he was an intern at the General Hospital.

"Doctor Lyall sent me here to tell you something!" he cried out. "I was kidnaped last night to take care of a bandit!"

CHAPTER XII

Mr. Hardy's Discovery

the excited young intern was led into the Hardy living room, but he refused to sit down.

"I can't stay long," he said quickly. "Here's my story. I was on call last night at the hospital. A nurse came to tell me I was to go to the emergency entrance at once to help a friend of mine. When I got there someone ordered me into a car, and I was driven away."

The rest of the episode as told by Doctor Mills was similar to what had happened to Doctor Lyall. The main difference was that the intern could give no idea as to how long he had ridden, nor could he judge at what speed the car was driven to the place where he had treated a young man with a gunshot wound in his right leg.

The Hardys were discouraged that so far the intern had given them no clues. But hopefully they continued to quiz him for several minutes, and were about to give up, when suddenly he snapped his fin-99

100 The Secret Panel gers. He believed he did know something helpful.

"I did notice something that might help you. One of the bandits wore a very unusual signet ring. It was large, and on the top was a strange design, like three spokes of a wheel."

Frank, Joe and their father looked at one another. Frank grabbed up a newspaper, and in one corner of it sketched the strange, open-faced Y.

"Was it like this?" he asked the intern excitedly.

"Yes, it was exactly like that, I should say."

"Then you have given us a very valuable clue," Mr. Hardy told him.

"I'm glad," said Doctor Mills. "I'd certainly like to see those hijackers put behind bars."

"They gave me the scare of my life."

The intern said he must leave. As he was going out the front door, Mr. Hardy said he would notify the police to warn all other interns, as well as medical students, to be on their

guard against kidnapers. Then he turned to his sons, adding: "Boys, it begins to look as if we might be getting somewhere on this mystery."

Frank and Joe wanted to know if their father thought the kidnaper who wore the signet ring was John Mead. He told them his answer would depend on a telephone call he would make. It was not until the family was dressed and had finished breakfast that they got his reply.

"I've just learned," he said, "that a ring such as you and Doctor Mills described was stolen from a Mr. Hardy's
Discovery 101

museum some time ago. It's an ancient and very valuable ring."

"Whew!" whistled Joe. "Then I guess there isn't much doubt that fellow Mead we met on the road must be one of the museum thieves. And he seemed like such a nice person, too."

"He still may be all right," spoke up Mr. Hardy. "You know the old saying, 'A person is innocent until he is proved guilty,' and we haven't proved him guilty yet."

The detective announced he was going over to see Constable Pickens about the fingerprints on the book which had been stolen from the Hamilton Museum. Frank and Joe were disappointed. They had hoped their father would go to the Mead home with them, and said so.

"I was about to ask you for the key," Mr. Hardy said, a twinkle in his eye.

"You mean, sir, you don't want us to go with you?" Joe asked in disappointment.

"I was just testing you a bit," the detective replied. "You boys have so many mysteries you are trying to solve, I wondered if you were going to carry through on this one."

"Of course we are," said Frank. "Let's go!"

Father and sons set off immediately for the mysterious mansion on the bay. When they arrived there, Mr. Hardy walked over the grounds and made several notes before entering the house. He was extremely interested in the doors, remarking that it was 102 The Secret Panel the first time he had ever seen anything like them.

"You boys did well to figure out the locations of these hidden locks," he said.

Frank opened the front door and led the way into the hall. He immediately felt for a wall switch and clicked it, but no light came on.

"Current's still off," he remarked.

The boys proceeded to show the detective the finely furnished interior of the house, using their flashlights when necessary. Mr. Hardy was not too interested in the decorations.

His eyes were hunting for clues to explain the connection between the house, John Mead, the key, the ring, and the museum thieves.

Frank and Joe admired the thoroughness of their father's search. In the hall, as well as in the other rooms, the detective ran his fingers over the walls expertly. Suddenly he paused at one corner of the library and surveyed the carved paneling. A moment later he moved aside the petals of a flower. To the astonished boys the dial of a wall safe was revealed.

The detective began moving the dial from right to left. Apparently his first try was not successful, because he stood silent before the safe for several seconds. Then once more he began to turn the dial. Half a minute later he grasped the handle on the safe, and the door opened.

"Dad! You're a wizard!" cried Joe, leaping forward. "How did you do it?"

Mr. Hardy's Discovery 103

Mr. Hardy did not reply. He flashed his light inside the safe, then closed the door.

"There's nothing in it," he announced in disgust.

"You think someone robbed it?" asked Frank.

"Perhaps, but then old Mr. Mead may not have left anything in it."

The detective looked off into space. Frank and Joe knew better than to disturb their famous father when he was trying to work out a problem. Now, as he dropped into a chair, they too sat down and waited for him to speak.

"You want to know how I was able to open the safe," he said. "I assure you I do not use burglars' methods. I know that eccentric persons, such as old Mr. Mead, usually want to figure out things for themselves. Such a man would not use a combination which a safe company might offer. He would rather make up a combination of numbers himself, and what would you say would come to his mind first?"

"His name," Frank answered. "In the alphabet John would be 10-15-8-14."

"Possibly," said Mr. Hardy. "But in this case that was not what he used. Give another guess."

"His birthday," spoke up Joe. "But that couldn't be it, because you don't know when it is, Dad."

"You're right about what Mr. Mead used," said his father, "but you're wrong about the other. I took the trouble to find out when John Mead was born. It was October 15, 1870."

104 The Secret Panel "The dial did turn to 10-15-18-70!" cried Frank, remembering. "But, Dad, how did you know when to turn the dial left or right, and in what order?"

The detective smiled, admitting that he had made a few failures before finding the correct sequence of the combination.

"And now I must be on my way to see Constable Pickens," he told the boys. "I believe you're going to the salvage company to find out about having Chet's boat raised? I hope you'll pick up something useful to our case."

Fenton Hardy dropped his sons at a bus stop on the highway, wishing them luck in their venture. Frank and Joe had a rather long wait, but at last a bus came along and they hopped aboard. The boys recognized a Mr. Dwyer, an old friend of their father's, seated in the rear.

He nodded pleasantly, motioning them to sit near him.

"Haven't seen you boys in almost a year," he remarked genially. "I understand you've been filling up the jails with criminals since I last saw you."

"We always try to do our bit," Frank told him, smiling.

"We've been getting a break," said Joe, and added, grinning, "We hope the criminals won't, though."

The boys asked Mr. Dwyer if he was still in the same business. The man told them he had gone into something different. He had helped organize a new boatbuilding company in Bayport, and as yet few people knew about the work.

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"We're making small underwater craft."

"Submarines?" Joe asked eagerly.

"A certain type, yes," Mr. Dwyer replied. "But we are not working for the government."

We're making pleasure craft, and have sold a few already." Smiling, he added, "Maybe one of these days you boys will want to own one of them."

The Hardys said they certainly would. How exciting it would be to travel in a fast underwater boat! Frank believed that he had already seen one of Mr. Dwyer's craft. He told about the time he was looking for Chet's sunken dory, and had thought he saw a whale.

"No doubt it was one of our boats," said Mr. Dwyer.

As he was about to leave the bus, he invited the boys to accompany him to the factory, but they felt that it was important to go directly to the salvage company.

"Thank you just the same," said Frank. "We'll come another time if we may."

The brothers rode a few minutes longer before reaching the salvage company. Entering the office, Frank stated their errand. The man in charge looked puzzled. *i>*

"Why, he's already gone on one of our boats," he said.

"Who has already gone?" asked Joe.

"That other man who was interested in the dory. Didn't you know he was coming?"

106 The Secret Panel The Hardys said they certainly did not, and asked for more details. To their amazement they heard that a man had called at the salvage company early that morning, and had

engaged their services to raise a sunken dory. Frank and Joe were positive it was Chet's boat.

"Are they out on the bay now?" Frank asked.

"Yes."

The Hardy boy turned to his brother. "We'd better get busy, Joe. Come on! We'll get the Sleuth and go after them!"

CHAPTER XIII

The Puzzle of the Lights

luckily a bus came along as the Hardy boys raced from the office of the salvage company. They hopped aboard, and not long afterward reached the boathouse where they kept the *Sleuth*.

Joe had the engine going in no time, and sped out into Barmet Bay. He headed for the spot where Chet's dory had gone down. No salvage boat was in sight. To the boys' dismay, they could see no sign of the *Bloodhound*, though they circled round and round the vicinity, peering down through the water, "They must have raised it!" Frank concluded.

"Now what'll we do?" Joe asked in disgust. "Go back to the salvage company?"

"Guess we'll have to," sighed Frank.

His brother headed the *Sleuth* in that direction. They had gone only half a mile when they spied the salvage boat just ahead. Hoping that Chet's dory was aboard, and that they could nab the man who had ordered it raised, the Hardys drew up alongside 107

108 The Secret Panel the salvage boat and hailed it. The larger boat stopped. The captain came to the rail.

"What's that you say?" he called down, not understanding Frank's request.

The boy repeated his question.

"Yes, I raised a sunken dory, but I haven't got 'er aboard," the man said. "I put 'er on the beach where the fellow who owned the dory told me to."

"But he didn't own it!" Frank cried.

The captain was astounded. He asked for more details, and upon hearing the whole story, told the Hardys where they no doubt could find the ill-fated boat. Without waiting for further discussion, Joe swung the *Sleuth* toward the north shore of Barmet Bay.

"Gee, we're sure running into bad luck," he said.

"Maybe we can nab the thief and get the dory too," Frank suggested hopefully.

There was no doubt in his mind but that the man who had ordered the boat raised was the fellow who had sold the dory to Chet and had trapped the three boys in the room at 47

Packer Street. Hoping that the thief planned to move the *Bloodhound* by truck, but had not already done so, Frank had an idea.

"Let's hide on the shore and nab him when he comes back with the truck," he suggested.

"Maybe he won't be back. The guy probably took what he wanted out of that fish box and skipped," Joe said.

When the boys reached the spot where the captain The Puzzle of the Lights 109

said he had deposited the dory, there was no sign of the boat. Frank, wading ashore, discovered tracks which indicated that the dory had been dragged some distance

away. He eagerly followed the marks, but to his dismay they ended abruptly. Chet's *Bloodhound* was not in sight! Disappointed, Frank went back to report this to Joe.

"The tracks ended at a little road," he said. "Evidently a truck was waiting and carried the dory away."

The youth climbed back into the motorboat, and the brothers went into a huddle. They admitted having been outwitted, and had no way of knowing where the *Bloodhound* had been taken. Then suddenly Frank snapped his fingers.

"I've an idea," he said. "I'll bet that dory came from the Mead place and has been taken back there."

"What makes you think so?" Joe asked.

"My only clue is that strange Y symbol. It was on the ring of the man who gave us the key to the house, and there was a mark on the sunken dory that looked like it. If something funny is going on in that place-----"

"You mean lights on one time and off another?" Joe asked.

"Yes. And don't forget I'm sure I heard someone speak once when we were there."

"You're right," his brother agreed. "We'll go there!"

Joe sent their craft skimming across the water.

110 The Secret Panel On reaching the Mead property, Joe tied up to the dock. There was not a sign of anyone around.

The boathouse was tightly locked, and Chet's boat was not in sight. Suddenly Joe began to pull off his clothes.

"What are you going to do?" Frank cried.

"See if I can swim under the boathouse door," his brother replied.

He cut the water in a clean dive and disappeared. Frank waited eagerly for his return. A minute later a muffled voice cried out: "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Frank shouted back. "Are you inside?"

"Sure am. The boat's not here, but I'm going to look around a bit."

"Good idea."

Frank waited, hoping no one would put in an appearance to ask what the boys were doing there. Presently Joe returned and climbed aboard the *Sleuth*. As he dried himself and put on his clothes, Frank asked him what he had seen.

"The dory wasn't there, you said?"

Joe shook his head. There was no boat of any kind inside the building. The boy had collected a bit of evidence, though, which he thought was valuable.

"There was an old oar on a rack," he announced, "That same funny Y was carved on it!"

"Honest?"

"Yes. I looked at it twice to make sure. There'

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no question in my mind now but that the dory belongs to this Mead place."

"You're right," said Frank. "I still think the dory will be brought here sometime, probably after dark. What say we come back later to find out?"

"Okay. And I believe we ought to tell Chet what happened to his boat. After all, we're supposed to be working on his case, aren't we?"

Joe believed, too, that they should arrive at the Morton farm just about lunchtime.

"Maybe we can turn the tables on Chet," he suggested, with a grin. "Aunt Gertrude says he eats us out of house and home."

Frank was inclined to feel that his brother had another reason for going there. Lola Morton! But he said nothing about this.

"Sure thing," he laughed. "Mrs. Morton's about the best cook in the world."

When the brothers reached home, they whispered to their mother where they were going. But they could not get out of the house without Aunt Gertrude remarking about the fact.

"Gallivanting again!" she said sternly. "Home the last thing at night, and out first thing in the morning. Now you've been in this house just about five minutes, and you're going out again. Why can't you sit down and be quiet?"

" 'Cause we have the itch to be doin' somethin'," said Joe.

Aunt Gertrude turned a disapproving gaze on her 112 The Secret Panel nephews. "I'd say it would be better if you'd sit down and do something to improve your

English," she stated. "When I was a girl your age-----"

"Oh," said Joe, a twinkle in his eye. "Dad told us you were a tomboy, Aunt Gertrude."

Before the surprised woman could think of an answer, the boys had scooted through the doorway. They got out their roadster and headed for Chet Morton's home. As Frank had predicted, the midday meal was about to be served.

Chet's sister lola was glad to see the boys, especially Joe. She told Frank to go into the living room; that there was something for him to see in there. He found Gallic Shaw listening to the radio.

"Oh, hello!" the girl said. "I didn't know you were coming!"

"No?" said Frank. "Didn't a birdie tell you I'd be here?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I just heard it."

"How?"

"Over the radio," Gallic teased, keeping her face straight.

"That so?" asked Frank, knowing now he was being kidded, and hoping to get the better of the situation. "And did the announcer say that's why you decided to stay to lunch?"

At this Gallic blushed, and said Frank was a horrid boy. She announced to Mrs. Morton, who came into the room, that the Hardys had had their lunch and could not eat another thing.

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"I'm so sorry," said Mrs. Morton. "We were having fricassee chicken and biscuits."

Then she laughed, for Frank's expression gave him away. The good-natured woman said she would set two more places at the table at once, and asked Frank to call Chet.

"He's out spraying the apple trees," she said.

Frank went to find his plump friend, who was delighted to be relieved of the spraying job, and started for the house.

"Wait a minute," said Frank. "I have something to tell you."

He related the story of the dory being salvaged. Chet's eyes nearly popped from their sockets; then he shook his head sadly and groaned.

"Gee whiz! What am I going to do now?" he asked.

The fat boy brightened, however, when Frank said he and Joe were going back to the Mead house later to see if the *Bloodhound* had been brought there. Chet was sorry not to be able to go along, but expressed faith in his friends' ability to solve his troubles. As the two boys walked toward the house, he asked Frank not to say anything to his folks about the boat.

The meal hour was a jolly one. Immediately afterward the Hardys left the house. At Joe's suggestion they went into Bayport and stopped at the electric power company.

"I want to inquire if there's an account for the 114 The Secret Panel Mead place on the bay," he said, jumping from the roadster. "It may be under some other name."

A girl in the office looked up the records. The power company had not had a listing for the Mead house for some time. Joe thanked her and went outside.

"Somebody's tampering with the current at the Mead house," he told Frank. "It was shut off years ago. Whoever that person is, he must know how to turn on the juice without the power company knowing anything about it."

When the brothers arrived at the mansion they looked for evidence of recent visitors.

There seemed to be no freshly made footprints, nor were there any automobile tracks. Frank opened the front door and clicked the electric switch in the hall. No lights went on.

"The person who turns on the juice isn't around here now, that's sure," he remarked. "I'm going to do a little investigating in the cellar and try to find out where the line comes in from the road."

He turned on his flashlight and led the way below. The brothers hunted in vain for any sign of a switchboard or fuse box.

"Maybe old Mr. Mead concealed it like he did the locks and latches," said Frank.

Finding a large wooden panel on the wall, the boy studied it carefully. He felt sure that what he was looking for was behind it. There was no sign of a

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knob or a lock. Finally Frank placed his hands on the bottom of the panel and pushed. It slid up.

"The switchboard!" he cried, flashing his light inside.

He reached up and touched one of the oblong handles. At the same instant that the basement was flooded with light, Frank fell to the floor unconscious!

CHAPTER XIV

The Intruder

the shock had knocked out Frank completely. Joe, fearful, leaped to his brother's side and felt for his pulse.

"Thank goodness he's alive," he murmured.

Quickly Joe gave his brother first aid. In a few moments Frank opened his eyes, wondering where he was and what had happened to him. He tried to speak but was unable to. Joe, who had ceased to worry for a second, became frightened all over again.

"Frank! Frank!" he called softly.

At last his brother was able to speak, saying he would be all right. Joe told him what had happened, and suggested they get out of the house at once. He started to pick up Frank, but the older boy assured him he could walk.

They went up the stairs, but on reaching the kitchen Frank was so weak he sat down in a chair. He told Joe to look around the house alone while he rested. The younger boy started off. Going from room to room, he tried the lights, becoming 116

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more and more puzzled by the moment. In some places they flashed on at once, in others they did not. As he went the rounds a second time, those which had not snapped on at first, now lighted up brightly.

"I can't understand it," he said to himself. "Someone must be tampering with the feed line on the outside."

Guided by the hall light, Joe stepped into the library, which was dark. Just then he heard a loud groan.

"Frank!" he cried, conscience-stricken, and rushed back to the kitchen.

His brother still sat in the chair, but was deathly white. He admitted feeling rather bad.

Joe insisted they leave at once, and helped Frank to the car. By the time they reached home, Frank felt much better. The boy remarked that maybe somebody at the Mead house had tried to put him out of the way with an electric shock!

"But I'm glad I fooled 'em," he said, with a faint grin. "I'm made of pretty tough stuff."

"Yes," agreed Joe, "like that steak we had at Bear Camp last summer."

"You mean some from the bear you shot?" asked Frank.

His brother's face grew red. The incident was a great joke in the Hardy family and they often teased Joe about it. The boy thought he had shot a bear in the woods, when actually their guide had killed the animal. For several days after the event, Joe had been under the delusion that he was a great hunter.

118 The Secret Panel "Something's the matter here," Joe remarked, as he pulled open the kitchen screen door.

"What do you mean?" asked Frank.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when he too became aware of loud voices in the front part of the house. Aunt Gertrude seemed to be trying to console someone, but she was talking so excitedly that her attempts were not very effective. A moment later the brothers recognized the other speaker as Mrs. Fanny Stryker.

"I don't care what they say," Lenny's mother cried out. "Nobody seems to be doing anything for me! My son's honest and I want him back!"

"You have no right to talk about my brother and my nephews that way," Miss Hardy said with spirit. "They are the best detectives in this state; in fact, in the whole United States!"

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Frank and Joe looked at each other and grinned. This was high praise from Aunt Gertrude! High praise which she would not have voiced had she known they were listening.

With a wink at his brother, Joe turned around and slammed the kitchen door. Then with a "Hello, anybody home?" he stalked into the front of the house. Before either he or Frank could greet Mrs. Stryker, Aunt Gertrude flared up and berated the boys for making so much noise.

"Why can't you come into this house quietly?" she reprimanded them.

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"Sorry, Aunty," said Joe. "I suppose a really great detective wouldn't make so much noise."

His relative looked searchingly at the boy, but he gave no sign of having overheard her.

"Have you had any word from Lenny?" Frank asked Mrs. Stryker.

The woman shook her head, remarking that she had heard from no one.

"These racketeers have things fixed so he can't let me know where he is," she said sadly. Then she added with vigor, "I thought you boys and your father were going to work on his case for me. But I ain't heard a thing from you."

Frank and Joe told her about the kidnaping of the young intern, and how he had been forced to take care of a gunshot wound in the leg of one of the members of the gang. Mrs.

Stryker twisted her fingers nervously until they had finished.

"It was just like they did to the other doctor, wasn't it?" she cried out at last. "Oh, I'm sure he was taking care of my Lenny."

"We're sure too," said Frank, "and I have a hunch Lenny'll soon be coming home to you."

"You have?" Mrs. Stryker asked eagerly. "Oh, you must know something you're not telling me!"

The Hardy boys had to admit that they really were no closer to the solution of the mystery, but they were hopeful that certain clues they were gathering would lead them to the gang.

"But don't let the police get my son!" Mrs. Stryker 120 The Secret Panel pleaded. "He's a good boy and he's honest. He mustn't go to jail."

"We'll do everything we can," Joe promised her.

After Mrs. Stryker left, the boys went into conference. Aunt Gertrude insisted upon being present, and advised her nephews that the police should take care of lawbreakers, not they.

"Lenny Stryker probably did some shooting himself!" she declared.

"We certainly shan't let anybody who should be in jail go free," Frank assured his relative.

The telephone rang, and Joe hurried into the hall to answer it. The caller was his father.

The detective listened intently as his son related the day's happenings. He then warned Joe to be very careful, saying they probably were on the trail of some desperate men.

"Pass that along to Frank," he ordered. "And tell him there is no more dangerous or cruel fighter than a cornered criminal. Now I'll tell you my plans."

He explained that there were only two museums within a radius of a few miles of Bayport which had not been broken into by the mysterious thieves, who apparently could enter buildings without the use of a skeleton key.

"I have good reason to believe the men are very daring, and will attempt to rob these museums, even though they must know by this time that the places will be guarded. I can't

give you the details over the telephone of what I plan to do," he went on,

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cause the wires may be tapped. But I shall not be home tonight. Tell Mother not to worry.

See you all in the morning."

Joe repeated the conversation to his brother. They felt certain their father was going to lie in wait inside one of the museums in order to trap the thieves. Often his procedure in nabbing criminals was to allow them to commit their crimes first. This time, no doubt, Mr.

Hardy hoped to discover how the thieves got into the museums without a key or any other device known to the ordinary burglar.

The boys were still discussing their father's telephone call when Mrs. Hardy came home, and they gave her his message. Aunt Gertrude had dinner ready, and as usual she insisted they all sit down at once to eat it.

"An old friend of yours is coming over this evening, Laura," she announced presently.

"Joe, don't take so much gravy. It isn't good for you."

"Who's coming?" asked Mrs. Hardy.

"Frank, eat more slowly," Aunt Gertrude ordered. "Laura, these boys certainly are going to ruin their digestion if they stuff themselves like this."

"But, Aunty," said Frank, "we've just started to eat."

"That makes no difference. I know by the way you two are starting out you plan to eat enough for four people. Oh, yes," she added, "Martha Johnson is coming to call."

"I'm so glad," said Mrs. Hardy. Then, turning to 122 The Secret Panel her sons, she explained that Miss Johnson was a school friend of hers. "She became a nurse and took care of you, Joe, when you were a baby. I haven't seen her since."

Aunt Gertrude said Miss Johnson was on a little vacation in Bayport, and had telephoned to see if the Hardys were at home. The boys' mother could hardly wait for her old friend to come. At last the woman arrived.

"Well, well," she said, looking at Joe. "To think you once were the little baby I took care of!"

The Hardy boy blushed. He stammered something about everybody growing up, and the nurse laughed. The boys talked with Miss Johnson for a while, and then excused themselves.

After they had gone out, the three women settled themselves in the living room for a long talk. Presently the conversation became so animated and full of laughter that they failed to hear the front door open softly and a stealthy figure tiptoe in. The man who entered listened to them for several moments. Then a cunning gleam came into his eyes.

"Perfect!" he told himself. "The dame in there is a nurse, eh? That solves our problem just fine. She can take care of Lenny, and if the cops get too hot on our trail the rest of us can vamoose."

The intruder moved on to Mr. Hardy's den. Reaching it, he went directly to the detective's desk and tried to open the

drawers. They were tightly locked. The burglar knew that if he attempted to The Intruder ' 123

break the desk open the women would hear him, so he turned to a filing cabinet which was not locked.

One by one, he noiselessly opened the drawers. Suddenly his eyes lighted up as he came upon a marked folder. Quickly he removed the papers from it and put them into his pocket.

At the same moment he heard Aunt Gertrude say in a loud voice, "Well, how about a glass of lemonade, Martha? I'll go fix some."

The intruder froze to the spot. He knew the woman would pass the den. She would see him!

Like lightning the mysterious figure tiptoed across the room and opened a window screen. He dropped lightly to the ground, hiding in the shadows of some tall bushes.

A Disturbing Report"> CHAPTER XV

A Disturbing Report

frank and Joe stayed away from the house until they were sure Miss Johnson, the nurse, had left. Then they started for home.

"No more baby stuff!" Joe grinned.

"I'm so full of ice cream I could burst," Frank said with a sigh.

Joe thumped his stomach. "I feel like Chet Morton looks. If- Oh!"

From down the street a woman's scream pierced the air. Frank and Joe galloped toward the spot. A moment later they heard a car speed away.

"What do you think that was?" Frank asked.

Joe shook his head. "I sure can't figure it out. Hope nobody's in trouble."

There was no evidence to indicate that anything was wrong in the neighborhood, so the boys turned into their own walk and entered the house. They had just reached the hall when there came a shriek from their father's den.

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"Aunt Gertrude!" shouted Frank, and dashed forward.

He and Joe expected to see their relative prostrate, the victim of some kind of attack.

But they found her standing in the center of the floor, unharmed.

"What's the matter?" Frank asked her.

His aunt seemed speechless. She merely held up a key case and dangled it before her nephews' eyes. Finally she was able to stammer: "They were on this table!"

Frank and Joe looked at the table blankly, then back at their aunt. Their questioning gaze brought a sharp retort from Miss Hardy.

"Don't you understand these are my keys, my stolen keys? How did they get here?"

The brothers suddenly understood what Miss Hardy was trying to say. "Those are the keys you thought you'd lost?" Joe asked.

Aunt Gertrude glared at the boy. "I never thought I lost them. I told you that before. What's the matter with your memory? Those keys were stolen from me on the bus."

"Oh!" chorused her two nephews.

The boys had been quite sure Aunt Gertrude had been wrong all along; that in some way she had misplaced her key case or had lost it. Now they could see that they were mistaken.

"Well, say something!" their aunt demanded. "You claim to be detectives. *How did these keys get here?*"

126 The Secret Panel Frank and Joe admitted they did not have the slightest idea, but on a hunch Frank went to his father's desk. It was locked.

"The filing cabinet!" cried Joe, understanding.

The brothers had jumped to the same conclusion. A burglar!

Together the boys pulled out drawer after drawer. Although not familiar with everything in the cabinet, they immediately noticed that the sheaf of papers containing fingerprint records of the museum thieves was gone. They had seen their father put away the data in that very drawer.

"They're gone!" cried Frank. "We've been robbed!"

"Now you boys are using your heads," stated Aunt Gertrude. "I could have told you all along that a burglar stole my keys on the bus, and used them to get into this house."

She went on to scold her nephews for not having been at home to nab the mysterious stranger, but they hardly paid attention to her words. Slowly an idea was evolving in their minds.

"Well, who was it?" Aunt Gertrude demanded, bringing them out of their daydreaming.

"Mike Matton," said Frank suddenly.

At once his relative demanded an explanation. Her nephew told her how Ben Whittaker's assistant had been tampering with their back-door lock a few days before.

"Matton said he was changing the lock, but we A Disturbing Report 127

think he was trying to get in," Frank said. "Since he didn't succeed, maybe he stole your keys and used them here tonight."

"So you admit they were stolen?" Aunt Gertrude said, eyeing her nephews triumphantly.

The boys had to admit this probably was the case. They wormed the information out of her that she had told the woman next to her on the bus she was Fenton Hardy's sister.

Suddenly Joe had an idea. "I wonder if that woman's scream had anything to do with the fellow who was in here," he said.

"You mean when he left the house he frightened her?" his brother asked.

Joe dashed to the window. The screen was dangling loose. "The crook went out this way," the boy reported. "When he ran from the side of the house, he probably scared some passer-by."

Frank turned to his aunt. "When did Miss Johnson leave here?" he cried quickly.

"A few minutes ago. Why?" Then she added, "What has that got to do with the stolen keys?"

"Didn't you hear a scream outside?"

"No."

Frank told her about the mysterious cry they had heard. Aunt Gertrude had not noticed it, because a moment after

the nurse had left Mrs. Hardy had turned on the radio. The boys'

mother herself now appeared in the doorway. She had not heard the scream outside nor Aunt Gertrude's shriek in the 128 The Secret Panel house. When she was told the whole story, Mrs. Hardy became quite concerned.

"That fellow must have sneaked right past us," she said with a slight shiver. "Oh, it frightens me to think of a thief being in the house."

"It's positively wicked," stated Aunt Gertrude. "If I had seen that fellow I would have-----"

What Aunt Gertrude might have done never became known, for Frank interrupted her, asking excitedly, "Where does Miss Johnson live?"

"She's staying at Mrs. Brown's Guest House."

Learning that it was not far away, and that Miss Johnson had said she was going directly home, Frank requested his mother to telephone the place at once to see if the nurse had returned. Mrs. Brown, who answered the call, said her guest had not come back yet.

"When she does, will you please ask her to telephone Mrs. Hardy?" the boys' mother requested.

An hour went by, but no call came. The boys, uneasy, telephoned again. Still Miss Johnson had not returned. Frank and Joe had hoped not to worry their mother with an idea they had, but she wormed the information out of them. They were afraid Miss Johnson had been kidnaped by the thief in order to take care of Lenny Stryker!

In the morning they telephoned again to Mrs. Brown's Guest House. The nurse had not come back.

"Oh, dear, this is dreadful!" cried Mrs. Hardy.

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"I'm sure your theory is right, boys. No telling what has happened to Martha. What can we do?"

Her sons could think of nothing at the moment, but by the time breakfast was over they had formulated a plan of action. They would investigate thoroughly the section of Bayport which they had looked over casually the night before last. Perhaps daylight would reveal some clue to the gang's hide-out.

"I think we ought to go down and talk to Ben Whittaker too," said Frank. "He may have heard from Mike Matton."

"Or perhaps the police can tell us something," Joe suggested.

Frank also thought they should go out once more to the Mead estate and dive under the boathouse door to see if Chet's stolen dory had been taken there.

"It sounds like a full morning," said Mrs. Hardy, "but please lay everything aside and try to find Martha Johnson."

"We certainly will, Mother."

Suddenly from the Hardy kitchen came sounds of a news broadcast. The laundress, who had arrived for work, was eating her breakfast and had turned on the kitchen radio. It

was very loud, and the words were plainly audible in the dining room.

"-A local item of great interest," stated the announcer, "is about another baffling robbery."

Frank and Joe sat up straight in their chairs. They listened attentively as the newscaster went on:

130 The Secret Panel "Thieves broke into the Cornish Museum last night. Many small valuable items were stolen. The police are completely baffled. No one was seen to enter the place, and a detective inside was found injured and taken to the hospital."

Frank and Joe looked at each other. Their hearts stood still.

Was the victim their father?

CHAPTER XVI

Fingerprints

the four at the breakfast table were shocked by the thought that Mr. Hardy might be lying in a hospital, the victim of some clever thief. The boys' mother tapped nervously on the table.

For once Aunt Gertrude seemed tongue-tied. Joe was the first to find his voice.

"Let's call up every hospital till we locate Dad," he cried, starting for the telephone.

"Wait a minute!" Frank advised, catching hold of his brother's arm. "I don't believe it was Dad after all."

He explained that the victim certainly was known; probably he was a member of the police department of the town of Cornish. Had the man been Mr. Hardy, surely his family would have been notified by this time. Aunt Gertrude, now over her scare, sniffed: "Well, knowing my brother as I do, I'd say the whole thing is a hoax."

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132 The Secret Panel "What do you mean?" Mrs. Hardy asked.

"I mean that I believe this was a clever idea of Fenton's. If he pretends to be injured, and if those crooks think he's in a hospital, they may come out into the open."

"And be caught!" yelled Joe. "I'll bet you're right, Aunt Gertrude."

Miss Hardy looked pleased. "So I guess we needn't worry any more about Fenton. You boys can get started looking for Martha."

For a few seconds Frank and Joe had completely forgotten the work they had mapped out for themselves. Now, being reminded that they ought to get busy, they left the house.

Their first stop was Police Headquarters to see Chief Collig.

"Say, you boys weren't giving us the run-around on that Packer Street story, were you?"

the officer asked suspiciously.

"Now, Chief," grinned Joe, "you know we could never do that to you. You'd catch on right away."

Collig smiled. He was in a good mood.

"You found out yet how to get into that lockless Mead mansion?" he teased.

"Yes, we have, Chief," Joe replied. "We waved our arms in front of the door and said 'Bay-Bay-Bayport, C-C-Collig.' And it opened!"

The officer laughed until he was red in the face. Then in answer to a question from Frank, he told the boy his men had orders to watch the house at 47 Packer Street constantly.

"Not a person has gone in or out of it," the officer reported. "Are you sure that was the address of the house in which you were attacked?"

"I'm positive," Frank replied. "Chief Collig, would you mind if we go over there now and look around inside?"

The boy did not state his reason, but it had occurred to him that possibly Lenny Stryker and the nurse, Martha Johnson, were imprisoned near by. Frank wanted to hunt for a secret panel which might lead underground to an adjoining building.

"It's all right with me, boys." Collig gave his permission. "So far as I know, the place is vacant and has been for some time."

"Where can we get a key?" Joe asked quickly.

The Chief, glad to show his efficiency, said he already had obtained one from the real-estate agent who had charge of the place.

Collig took the key from a drawer, and handed it to the boy. He spoke into his office telephone, ordering Patrolman Riley to come from the back room and accompany the Hardys. Frank and Joe hurried toward 47 Packer Street. The plump patrolman tried in vain to keep up with them.

"Take it easy, fellows," he pleaded, red-faced and puffing. "I just had my breakfast. One shouldn't run on a full stomach."

"Could you run on an empty one?" Joe flung back over his shoulder.

Riley was not sure what the boy meant. Now 134 The Secret Panel that he thought about it, one couldn't run in that

position at all. To the patrolman, his stomach was a very important matter indeed. He loved to eat. When he talked, Riley had a habit of patting himself near his waistline, which showed definite signs of his big appetite.

As a result of his size, he arrived at 47 Packer Street a good five minutes after the Hardys had reached the house. The boys were already inside the deserted house, tapping its walls for a possible secret panel.

"What in thunder are you fellows doing?" Riley asked them.

"Hunting for ghosts," Joe explained.

He and Frank had promised Mrs. Stryker they would not divulge her secret. Even though the police might eventually have to know the story, Riley was not the member of the force to be told about it. The patrolman did not offer to help the boys. After a while he guffawed at their efforts.

"Ghosts, eh? You two make me laugh. This ain't the kind of house where a ghost would live."

"I guess you're right," Frank conceded at last. He and his brother had found nothing to indicate a secret panel. "But there's one thing sure. Some live ghosts have been here, and pretty recently, too."

"What do you mean?" Riley demanded.

Frank pointed to a number of footprints plainly visible on the dusty floors.

"So what?" Riley asked. "There's nothin' special Fingerprints
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about them. The police have been here." He squinted at one particularly heavy mark in the room where the boys had been locked in. "I could swear that one belongs to Patrolman Crossley."

"What about these finger marks?" Frank pointed to a window sill. "Are they Crossley's?"

The patrolman grunted. "How should I know?" he said. "What difference does it make anyhow?"

Frank did not explain. Turning to Joe he said, "How about you going home to get our kit?"

Riley was completely confused. He saw no necessity for more investigation. But he had been outsmarted so many times, due to the acuteness of the Hardy boys, that he did not

argue further.

It was Frank's idea that the fingerprints and footprints might belong to friends of the thief who had taken Chet's boat. Convinced that there was some connection between him and the museum robbers, the boy decided to take photographs of the marks. It seemed all the more important now, since the folder containing the fingerprint records had been stolen from Mr. Hardy's files.

Joe raced home and grabbed up his kit. When he returned to 47 Packer Street, Riley gasped.

"I didn't know you fellows owned anything like that," he said. "And how'd you learn to work it?" The patrolman was envious. He had studied fingerprinting at Headquarters but had failed to pass the test.

"Dad taught us," said Joe, taking out the special 136 The Secret Panel camera and holding it over the white window sill.

He clicked on the lights in the camera and squinted into the focusing panel. The fingerprints showed up plainly.

"Won't need any powder on these, Frank," he said.

"Good. I found some marks on this wall but they're not very plain. Think I'll powder 'em."

While Joe busied himself taking five-, ten-, and fifteen-second time exposures of the fingerprints on the window sill, Frank opened a bottle of gray-colored powder and poured a little of it on a sheet of paper. Next he picked up a small camel's-hair brush by the handle and twirled it back and forth between his palms to make it fluffy. Then, after dipping the tip of the brush into the powder, the boy passed it lightly over the indistinct fingerprints on the wall.

"Ready for the picture, Joe," he announced.

His brother came across the room. Patrolman Riley came also, saying he wanted to look into the camera. Joe let him, but the clumsy man snapped the finger release by mistake and wasted a film.

"Oh, I'm awful sorry, Joe." Riley was flustered.

The Hardy boy said nothing. He took the camera, focused it, and took several pictures of the fingerprints on the wall.

"Okay," he said. Before putting the camera back into the kit, Joe took snaps of the various footprints on the floor of the room, then he said, "Guess we'd better go home now, Frank, and develop these pic-Fingerprints 137

tures. I certainly hope they turn out all right."

Riley still was amazed. Shaking his head the officer left the boys, who hurried home.

They had just finished developing the pictures in the cellar laboratory, when their father walked in.

"Dad!" Joe cried, rushing up to him. "You're all right!"

"Of course I'm all right," Mr. Hardy grinned. "Wasn't I supposed to be?"

His sons looked at their father intently. They were sure there was a trace of a smile around the corners of his mouth.

"You know you aren't supposed to be all right," said Frank. "I'll bet you came home in a disguise."

The detective grinned. His son had guessed the truth! Also his sister. A dummy figure had been put on guard inside the Cornish Museum, and judging from the distorted appearance of its plastic face, the thief who had entered the museum had made a good job of knocking it out!

"But I'm sorry to say that, though the Cornish police were on guard outside, they did not catch the intruder." Mr. Hardy sighed.

"Where were you, Dad?" Joe asked.

"Over in Harlington. Nothing happened at the museum there."

"But the crooks think you're in the hospital?"

Mr. Hardy nodded. Then he inquired what the boys were doing. Upon hearing that his fingerprint records of the museum thieves had been taken from 138 The Secret Panel his filing cabinet, the detective was very upset. It was a big loss.

"We hope the fingerprints we have just photographed will take their place," Frank told his father, after he had explained their latest work.

Mr. Hardy agreed there was good logic to the idea. He told his sons he had obtained photographs of the fingerprints on the book the boys had discovered in the country garage.

Taking them from his kit, he compared the swirls and ridges with those in the photographs Frank and Joe had just developed.

"One set in each is identical!" he exclaimed. "Boys, you have done a good job!"

It now was definitely established that the fellow who had sold Chet the battered dory, and then stolen it, was at least acquainted with the museum thieves and probably was one of them. Frank asked his father why the police who had been guarding the Cornish Museum had been unable to capture the intruder.

"Because he is a very clever fellow," the detective replied. "I wish he would put his brains to good use, instead of bad."

"Have you figured out how he manages to open doors without leaving any trace?"

Mr. Hardy did have a theory. Probably the thief had some kind of invention which, when inserted in any keyhole, would move the tumblers of the lock electronically.

"Meaning a short-wave key?" Joe asked.

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"You might call it that, son," the detective laughed. "In any case, it seems to me the only plausible answer to these mysterious entries is something of the sort."

"It's sure a clever idea," said Frank. "But, Dad, you haven't told us yet how the thief managed to get past the police."

The detective explained that a man had handed a letter from the Chief of Police at Cornish to the guard at the main door of the museum. The note had said the guard was to leave at once for home, and the newcomer was to take his place."

"And the newcomer had forged the note," guessed Joe. "He really was the thief?"

"Correct, son," said Mr. Hardy. "Between the time that the guard was dismissed and the hoax was discovered, the thief had entered the museum, taken many valuable pieces, and vanished."

"How do you know he didn't use a key?" Frank inquired.

The detective said a special new lock had been put on the front door of the museum that very afternoon. It was an intricate one, as nearly burglarproof as locks are made today.

"The lock was examined carefully after the robbery, and it showed no sign of having been tampered with," the detective went on. "That's why I feel sure he used some clever, new device."

Frank and Joe were fascinated by the idea, and hoped to learn very soon what this invention was.

140 The Secret Panel They asked their father if he had any special job for them, and learning he did not need them, decided to go on with their own sleuthing. They left the house a few minutes later by bus, and returned to the section which they had investigated slightly the night before last-one of the spots which was ten minutes from "singing" traffic light number two.

By daylight the place proved to be a new housing development. Only a few of the homes were occupied, while others were in various stages of building.

"Gee!" said Joe suddenly. "This really would be a swell hide-out for crooks. Maybe Lenny Stryker and the nurse, Martha Johnson, are being held in one of these empty houses."

Frank agreed. Since Doctor Lyall and the intern, Doctor Mills, had been taken in a car, the boys began to hunt eagerly for tire tracks. After a ten-minute inspection they came to a house at the far end of a dirt road, where a passenger car had been driven around to the

side several times.

"Doctor Lyall said the room he was in seemed to have no windows," said Joe. "That could easily mean he was taken to a cellar."

"Let's walk around the house before we try to get in," Frank suggested.

Quietly the brothers followed the automobile tracks. They stopped at a cellar door. Joe nodded meaningly to Frank. The

older brother crooked his finger to indicate they were to go on around the Fingerprints 141

house. Reaching the far side, the two boys stood gazing at the cellar windows over which black paper had been tacked.

"Shall we go in?" Joe whispered excitedly.

Frank nodded and started back toward the door. At the same instant he felt the ground give way. Joe had the same sensation. Then, before the brothers could jump aside, they were caught in a tremendous cave-in!

CHAPTER XVII

Angry Customers

the cries of the boys, mingled with the thudding sound of the cave-in, could be heard for some distance. A man who had just stopped his car in front of the empty house leaped out.

"What in thunder's going on here?" he asked himself, looking around fearfully.

All was quiet now. Yet he was sure the shouts he had heard were those of someone in trouble. Deciding the cries must have come from the rear of the house, he dashed forward.

When he beheld the area where the earth had collapsed, his eyes opened wide in horror.

"Great Scott!" he said. "That old brook must have opened up, and all the money I spent to fill it in, too!"

For the moment his thoughts were so occupied with his own problem that he completely forgot about the shouts he had heard. Below him Frank and Joe, holding their breaths until they realized it 142

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was impossible to do so much longer, were frantically clawing the loose dirt which had enveloped them. The man, seeing the heaving earth, suddenly came to his senses.

"Somebody's down there!" he decided in panic.

But how was he to help him?

Looking around wildly, he spied a large shovel and picked it up. Lying flat on his stomach at the edge of the cave-in, the man began tossing aside the dirt. Frank, about to lose consciousness, felt something hard near his upstretched hand. With a supreme effort the boy grabbed it.

It was only a matter of seconds until the stranger had pulled both Hardy boys from under the dirt. They lay on the ground, gasping for breath.

"Thank goodness, you're alive!" the man said in relief. "I don't know who you are, but I never should have forgiven myself if I hadn't reached you in time."

"Thanks," murmured Frank.

"Who-are-you?" Joe asked weakly.

The stranger explained he was the contractor for the new houses. Work was being held up on the project; that was why no men were on the job.

"I came over to see if everything was all right," he added. "I guess Providence must have sent me."

The contractor, a Mr. Smith, had a thermos bottle of hot soup in his car. After each of the boys had drunk a cup of it, they felt better. Joe thanked him and told the man who they were.

144 The Secret Panel "Of course I've heard of your father," said Mr. Smith. "As a matter of fact, I've also heard of you boys." Smiling, he added, "I suppose you've been chasing some criminal."

"To tell you the truth, sir, we're after one now, and we thought he might be hiding in one

of these empty houses. Do you mind if we take a look?"

"Not at all. I'll let you in."

He took the Hardy boys through all the unoccupied houses, and watched in some amusement as the brothers tapped walls now and then.

"Guess you'll have to stick to old houses to find any secrets," he said indulgently. "I never build hidden closets or trap doors in my houses."

The boys' faces turned red. They had become so absorbed in their hunt for the mysterious secret panel they had not stopped to think such a thing would scarcely be installed in a house which was being built for speculation. They told Mr. Smith they were through their work, and thanked him for letting them look around. He drove the brothers to the center of Bayport and said good-bye.

"Just the same, Lenny Stryker might have been in one of those houses and been moved," said Joe defiantly.

"Sure," agreed Frank, "but that doesn't help us now. If he was moved, where is he?"

Joe shrugged. "We'd better work on something else," he said. "Say, Ben Whittaker's shop is just around the corner. Let's go talk to him."

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The elderly locksmith was in the rear of his store. He greeted the boys solemnly, and told them he had heard nothing from his former helper, Mike Matton. The police had no trace of the stolen hardware. Worse than that, the fussy Mrs. Eccles was making matters very unpleasant for him.

"She threatens all kinds of things if I don't return her antique lock to her," Ben Whittaker said. "My reputation's going to be ruined."

"Oh, no," Frank spoke up quickly. "You've been in business here too many years for a little thing like that to make any difference, Mr. Whittaker."

"But it's not a little thing!" the man cried out. "There's Mr. Howard, and Mrs. Sommers, and-----"

"You mean other people were robbed and are making trouble?" Joe asked.

"Plenty of them are," the locksmith replied worriedly. "In each case, Matton went to the house when no one was there but a maid. He used the same story he told you. Oh, what shall I do?"

The boys asked the man to give a description of the hardware which had been stolen from the homes of the indignant people. Ben Whittaker was able to tell them little, as he had never seen any of it.

"Let's go see the people, Frank," Joe suggested. "Maybe we'll be able to pick up a clue of some kind that way."

"Good idea," his brother agreed.

The first house at which they called was a large, attractive one. Mr. Howard was an architect and, 146 The Secret Panel according to his own words, had put a great deal of thought into the building of a home for himself.

"One of my prize possessions was the knocker on the front door," he told the Hardys.

"The coat of arms of my family was embossed on it, and it was a fine piece of work. Why are you boys interested?" he asked suddenly.

Frank explained how the fellow who had removed Mr. Howard's knocker had almost been caught by them while tampering with the lock at their own home. "We'd like to track him down," he said.

"Well, I wish you luck!" the architect replied, rising to indicate that the interview was at an end.

Their next call was on a Mrs. Sommers. The woman appeared to be very much upset about the loss of the beautiful knocker which had been taken from her home.

"It was a very rare one," she told the boys. "I'm sure it never can be duplicated. I picked

it up years ago in Europe."

"What value did you put on it?" Joe asked her.

When Mrs. Sommers replied that the knocker was insured for a thousand dollars, the boys jumped. The woman added that, though the insurance company would pay her for it, she never would be able to replace it.

After the boys left her house, Frank told Joe that this startling information had given him an idea. Mike Matton must be acquainted with someone who was collecting unusual door hardware. No legiti-Angry Customers 147

mate dealer would buy such things secondhand without knowing the seller, and it was doubtful that even a pawnbroker would take in such articles.

"Do you suppose," Joe asked as a thought came to him, "do you suppose Mike Matton could have sold them to the person Dad's looking for?"

"You mean the guy that gets into the museums with some strange invention?"

"Exactly."

The gang stole old and rare objects from museums, and it was possible that their leader was interested in valuable hardware too. Joe felt Mike Matton somehow might be mixed up with the museum thieves; perhaps as a sort of errand boy for the leader. This would account for the theft of the fingerprint data from Mr. Hardy's file, and also might explain the theft of the valuable hardware from Mr. Whittaker's shop and from the well-to-do residents of Bayport.

"Do you know what I think we ought to do?" Frank said. "Photograph the fingerprints on Dad's filing cabinet. Ours and Dad's will be there, of course, but there may be a strange set too."

Joe inquired how his brother expected to find out whether the marks might be those of Mike Matton. Frank said he would go to old Mr. Whittaker's shop to inspect things Mike Matton had handled.

The net result of this work was a surprise and added a new complication to the mystery.

The recent intruder into the Hardy home was not Mike Matton!

148 The Secret Panel "More trouble," sighed Frank. "However, we've proved one thing. We probably have the fingerprints of the person who kidnaped Miss Johnson."

"Right you are," Joe agreed.

He suggested they leave the fingerprint work for a while and start out on the next job they were going to do; drive out to the Mead house and see if Chet's dory was there.

"Good idea. But let's stop and get Chet."

"You bet."

The brothers expected to find their stout chum either in the apple orchard or at the Morton icebox, but he was at neither place. No one was at home but Mrs. Morton. She seemed surprised to see the Hardys.

"I thought you boys would be over at the fair," she remarked.

"Fair?" Frank asked, puzzled.

"Oh, didn't you know about the county fair at Harlington? Chet went to it. I understand there are to be all sorts of amusements."

"Let's go, Frank!" Joe suggested impulsively. "We can have some fun and maybe find Chet."

The boys hurried to their roadster and sped away. A little later the outlines of a Ferris wheel came in sight.

"Quite a show," Joe remarked enthusiastically. "Shall we have some fun or try to find Chet right away?"

It was not necessary for the two Hardys to hunt Angry Customers 149

long for their friend. Not far from the entrance gate was a platform on which a man was announcing loudly:

"Ten dollars, I said! Ten dollars! Easiest way in the world to earn ten dollars! All you have to be is smart!"

The barker held up a large padlock. "All you got to do is open this. Sure, it's a trick lock.

But it won't cost you a thing to try. Come on! Step this way, gentlemen!"

Frank nudged Joe. The first customer to ascend the stairs was Chet Morton!

CHAPTER XVIII

The Lock Picker

the crowd roared with laughter as Chet Morton struggled with the padlock. He was determined to win the ten dollars for opening it.

"Hi, fat boy, you better quit before you bust," cried one of the bystanders. Chet was bent double and was very red in the face.

"It'll cost you more than ten dollars for a doctor!" another shouted at him.

Frank and Joe were grinning from ear to ear. They knew their friend thought he could open the padlock because he had heard so much about locks and keys lately. But Chet Morton finally gave up the attempt.

"Who's next?" called the barker. He pointed his finger directly at the Hardys and added, "You look like a couple of bright fellows. How about coming up here?"

"I sure could use ten dollars," Joe replied, and pushed his way through the crowd.

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He, too, struggled with the lock, but to no avail. Disgusted, he handed it back and Frank ascended the platform.

"A free soda if you make it!" cried the first bystander who had kidded Chet.

Frank grinned. "And I'm thirsty, too. Sure hope I can win it, sir."

But Frank did not win the soda. As he gave up his attempts to open the lock, a tall man about thirty-five years old elbowed his way through the crowd and came up the steps.

Without saying a word he took the lock in his hand, held it near his ear, and shook it. Then he closed his two hands over the lock, worked at it a few seconds, and presto! it opened.

The barker stared in blank amazement. Then he scowled. He had not expected anyone to open the padlock.

"Gimme my money," demanded the stranger who had won the contest.

Reluctantly the carnival man handed over a ten-dollar bill. Frank nudged Joe, and suggested they speak to the lock picker.

"Maybe he's on the level, but I don't like his looks," he said.

"Neither do I."

Several people had gathered around the fellow, but he walked away rapidly and the crowd turned back to watch the next contestant. Frank and Joe, however, ran after the man to compliment him on his feat.

152 The Secret Panel "It sure was a swell exhibition," Joe grinned. "I bet that faker never intended to pay out any money."

The lock picker did not reply. He kept on walking toward the entrance gate.

"I'll bet you're a locksmith," Frank spoke up. "Gee, you must be a good one."

Still the stranger did not speak. The Hardys were not discouraged by his attitude. They trotted along, one on each side of him. Finally Frank said: "You got a car?"

"No."

"Then how about letting us give you a ride? We're leaving."

"Okay," the unfriendly man replied.

At this moment Chet Morton came running up after his friends. "Hi, fellows!" he yelled.

Frank and Joe were in a panic. They did not want their stout friend to give away their identity. If, by any chance, the lock picker was connected with the gang they and their father were trying to apprehend, it would be fatal for him to know who they were.

Frank fell back a step, turned, and put a finger to his lips. Chet caught on at once. But the Hardy boy's precaution did them no good. As they reached the parking space beyond the entrance gates, a newcomer to the fair ran straight into the group. Smiling affably, he said in a loud voice: "Well, if it isn't Frank and Joe Hardy!"

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The man with them muttered something, and dodged behind a parked automobile. In a moment he had zigzagged his way out of sight. Frank, Joe and Chet dashed after him, but with the confusion of cars coming and going, the lock

picker managed to escape. The three boys hunted for some time but did not find him.

"I'm sorry he got away," said Frank. "But in a way, I'm glad this happened. Otherwise we might not have suspected him. Now I could almost bet he's mixed up with that gang of museum thieves."

Suddenly a sickly expression came over Joe's face. Frantically he began to look through all his pockets.

"What's the matter?" Chet asked him.

"My wallet! It's gone!"

The others did not have to ask whether Joe thought the stranger had taken it. So the man was a pickpocket as well as a lock picker! Joe swore by all the cats and dogs in Bayport that he would find the fellow and get his money back!

Frank began to examine the ground near by. In a moment he was down on his hands and knees, inspecting a heelprint plainly visible in the dust.

"If I'm not mistaken, we're in luck," he said. "Look here! That guy who just got away-his heel mark is like one we photographed at 47 Packer Street, I'll bet anything."

Joe dropped to his knees. He agreed with his brother, and suggested they go home at once and

154 The Secret Panel compare the picture of the heelprint with the one they had just seen.

"Want to come along, Chet, or are you going back to the fair and win some more money?"

His chum looked sheepish. He decided to accompany Frank and Joe, and a little later was very glad he had. Upon their arrival at the Hardy house, he found Aunt Gertrude removing a lemon meringue pie from the oven.

At once Chet's interest in matching footprints became nil. He lingered in the kitchen to praise Miss Hardy: first, for her attractive appearance; then, as an excellent housekeeper; and finally, as the country's best cook. Aunt Gertrude was not fooled by his build-up; neither was she averse to compliments. Secretly she agreed entirely with Chet, and without questioning his remarks, cut a very large slice of the freshly baked pie for him.

Chet was wondering how much more he might wheedle out of the Hardy boys' aunt, when to his dismay she picked up the pie, set it in a closet, locked the door, and dropped the key into her pocket. At this moment Frank and Joe dashed in.

"They match!" Frank cried. Then he spied what was left of Chet's feast. "Oh, Aunt Gertrude-----"

"What matches?" his relative asked him.

Frank laughed. "I'm going to make a bargain with you, Aunty," he said. "You give me a piece of pie and I'll tell you what matches."

"I don't believe in bribes," said Miss Hardy, try-The Lock
Picker 155

ing to be stern with this cajoling nephew of hers.

"Oh, Aunty," Joe said, "our information couldn't be paid for in pie."

"And just to show you what good sports we are," Frank said, "we'll tell you. A footprint we saw at Harlington matches one in Bayport."

Aunt Gertrude stared at her nephew. She knew he was teasing her. As Miss Hardy

could do a little of this herself, she informed the boy that, unlike the footprints, there was not another pie in the world that could match hers.

"Oh, we know that!"

Miss Hardy unlocked the closet door, cut pieces of the pie for her nephews, and once more locked up what remained of it. While they were eating, Mr. Hardy came into the kitchen. A longing smile spread over his face. His sister did not fail to catch it. She went to the closet, unlocked the door, and gave her brother a large piece of the pie. Then, muttering something about there not being any dessert left for dinner, she shooed everyone from the kitchen so she could start a second one.

Frank and Joe reported to their father the discovery they had just made about the matching footprints. He became interested at once and suggested that perhaps the secret panel for which the boys were hunting might be found in Harlington.

"I believe you should drive over there at once and investigate," he told them. "I'd like to go along, but I have to wait here for an important phone call."

156 The Secret Panel The three boys left the house and drove to Harlington. As they had done before, each boy took a certain section of the town for his investigation, planning to meet later in front of the post office. Chet soon finished

his work, and when Frank showed up an hour later, Chet was sitting on the curbstone, his head against a lamppost.

"What's the matter with you?" the Hardy boy asked. "You look almost sick."

"I'm sick with hunger," his chum replied. "Do we have to wait for Joe before we eat?"

Frank ignored the question. "Did you find out any thing for us?"

"Nope," Chet answered. "People just laughed at me when I asked them if there was a secret panel any place around here. One deaf guy thought I was talking about a sneak with a piano."

Frank laughed. He reported no better luck. Joe, joining them finally, excitedly said a couple he had met were sure they had seen a kidnaper's car go through the village last night.

"The man said just as it passed them a woman popped up in the back seat and screamed. A fellow beside her clapped his hand over her mouth, and the driver put on more speed. I'll bet she was Miss Johnson, the nurse."

"Which way did the car go?" Frank asked eagerly.

"Down a street called Midland Place. I investigated every house on it, but there didn't seem to be anything suspicious about any of them."

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"It's worth hanging around here to find out what we can just the same," Frank advised.

"It is if we eat," Chet spoke up.

"It's a good thing Aunt Gertrude can't hear you," Joe told the stout boy. "But I agree.

What say we go into this drugstore, Frank, and get him a sandwich?"

"Sandwich!" yelped Chet. "I want a full dinner."

"The place can oblige," Frank said, pointing to a sign on the window.

The boys went inside and ordered food. They kept close watch of all customers and passers-by on the street. As they were eating dessert, Joe said suddenly: "Well, what do you know? Look!"

Through the doorway came three laughing girls: Chet's sister Lola, Gallic Shaw, and Helen Osborne, who Chet thought was nice because she never laughed at him. At once the boys pulled another table up to their own, and the girls sat down.

"Chet will treat you all to a full-course dinner," Joe announced with a wink.

"Eh, what's the matter with you fellows?" the stout boy asked. Having spent most of his money at the fair, he was worried.

"You're safe, Chet," laughed Gallic. "We stuffed ourselves with hamburgers at the fair."

"But I could drink a soda," Lola said, a twinkle in her eye.

In the end everyone decided to have a soda. They

158 The Secret Panel had just begun to drink them, when Frank nudged Joe.

"That tall man at the counter over there!" he whispered excitedly. "He's the lock picker!"

"The one who stole my wallet!" Joe's voice rose a little. He started from his seat.

"Sh!" said Frank, pulling his brother down. "Do you see what he's buying? Bandage and antiseptic! He might lead us to Lenny Stryker and Miss Johnson!"

The Hardy boy turned to the others. "Listen," he said tensely, "all of you keep your heads down toward your soda glasses! And don't act surprised at anything you see in the next few minutes. After I leave the store, you follow me in the car, Joe!"

CHAPTER XIX

Chet in Difficulty

amazed, but without question, Frank Hardy's friends obeyed his instructions. Faces went down toward their soda glasses, but each person kept an eye on the boy's movements.

Quickly Frank crossed the store to a counter of novelties. Without thought to size or color he picked up a peaked cap, a pair of dark spectacles, and a small mustache. Hastily paying for them, he put on the disguise and dashed for the front door. Coming in was his friend Tony Prito.

"Hi, Tony!" he called.

The other boy stared at him without recognition. Before he could say anything the fellow with the mustache and goggles told him to have a soda; that the stout boy across the store would pay for it.

Reaching the street, Frank posted himself just around the corner. A moment later the lock picker, carrying his package of bandage and antiseptic, appeared and walked rapidly up the street. Frank followed.

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160 The Secret Panel As the fellow paused by an automobile, Frank wondered if he could possibly get into the back and spy on him without his knowing it. Luck favored the youth, because the man suddenly decided to go to a near-by stand and buy a newspaper. Frank quickly opened the rear door and lay down on the floor of the car.

The stranger returned, got in, and drove off without seeing the boy. Frank's heart pounded wildly. He hoped Joe was following him, but he did not dare raise his head to find out.

At the next street intersection the driver pulled up to the curb. A short, stocky man, who evidently had been waiting for him, jumped into the front seat. When the Hardy boy ventured to look up, he caught his breath. The newcomer was none other than the crook who had sold Chet Morton the battered boat!

"I thought you were never coming, Jeff," he said to the driver. "Did you have trouble?"

"No. But I certainly ain't goin' to be the errand boy any more. It's too dangerous. If you want the job, Griff, you can have it." Frank smiled. The schemer's name was Griff, and his friend the lock picker was Jeff! Here was a really worthwhile clue.

"Which way you going?" Griff asked, as the car evidently reached the edge of Harlington.

"Haven't you learned to keep your mouth shut yet?" Jeff snapped at him. "The less you say the better. You never know who's listening."

Chet in Difficulty 161

"Well, who could be listening in an empty car out on a country road?" Griff demanded angrily. Then, bothered by Jeff's remark, he looked over his shoulder toward the back seat.

"Well, what in the name of-• " he exploded.

Jeff yanked on the brake, demanding to know what the trouble was. He too turned around. By this time Frank had pulled himself up to the back seat. Deciding his only chance now was to play a part, he grinned in a silly way at the two men.

"Don't mind me," he said in a high, false voice. "I love to ride. And wadda you think?

Nobody ever asks me!"

The two men looked at each other, then back at the moron in their car.

"Please go on," the boy pleaded. "And go real fast, too. I like to go fast!"

Jeff's eyes closed until they were mere slits. His jaws snapped shut.

"Get out!" he shouted.

"Why, what have I done?" Frank asked in his high voice. "You wouldn't put me out when I've only been ridin' five minutes."

The man called Griff was inclined to be lenient, but Jeff would not have it that way.

Leaning back, he opened one of the rear doors. Griff, taking the cue, gave Frank a shove and he landed at the side of the road. While Griff was closing the door, Jeff threw the car in gear and sped down the highway.

Coming along behind them was Joe Hardy in 162 The Secret Panel the roadster. Frank jumped in beside his brother and they raced after the fleeing automobile. At a crossroads the boys lost time trying to decide which way the suspects had gone. Tire tracks indicated they might have taken a road which led directly to the bay, so Joe followed these to the end.

"I'm afraid they got away," he said in disappointment as they neared the water. Just ahead was the public dock of the Bayport Steamship Company, and some distance from shore was an outgoing ferry.

"You mean the car went on that boat?" Frank asked.

"Yes."

While Frank removed his disguise, Joe inquired at the office about the ferry's destination. The boys' worst fears were confirmed. The Hardys could not possibly drive to its next stop across the bay before the boat would dock and the suspects' car vanish.

In disgust the brothers returned home and tumbled into bed. A sound night's sleep refreshed their minds, and in the morning they were ready for action again. As they were dressing, the older boy suddenly snapped his fingers.

"Say, Joe," he said, "maybe those men never went on that ferry at all. What say we go back there and look around?"

"Smartest idea you've had in a week." Joe dodged the pair of pajamas Frank hurled at him.

The two boys hurried to the breakfast table. They had hardly seated themselves when their

Chet in Difficulty 163

plump friend came through the doorway from the kitchen, glaring at them irately.

"Chet! Aren't you up kind of early?" Joe gibed his friend.

The other boy ignored the question. "I'm here to collect six dollars and thirty-five cents,"

he announced, without smiling.

"Wow!" cried Joe. "It sounds like a damage suit."

"Well, you might call it that," Chet said. "Anyway, you fellows have to fork over the money."

"And why?"

"Guess you forgot you were going to buy my dinner last night. On top of that you invited a bunch of people to have sodas, and-" Chet pointed his finger accusingly-"and you left me the check!"

Frank and Joe burst into laughter. "So that's it?" said Joe. "Why, you ungrateful wretch!

We left you with three of Bayport's most beautiful girls. What's six dollars and thirty-five cents compared to that?"

"It was a fine idea," said Chet, "only I didn't have any money with me. Had to borrow it from my sister. And did she kid me! Well, hand over the cash!"

"How about a compromise?" Frank asked, winking at Joe. "We'll pay two-thirds. In

return for the rest you can have breakfast here and then go with us to nab that boat thief you're after. His name's Griff."

164 The Secret Panel Chet's eyes opened wide. He forgot his troubles at once, and demanded to be brought up to date on news of his case. Upon hearing the account of Frank's adventure the evening before, Chet was eager to start off at once on the trail of the crook. Even Aunt Gertrude was amused at his refusal of a second helping of fried apple rings and corn bread.

By nine o'clock the three friends were on their way in the roadster. Frank made no stops until they came to a red traffic light some distance out of town. To the boys' amazement the signal began to hum peculiarly as it changed color.

"Another singing light!" Joe yelled. "Maybe ten minutes' drive from here-----"

"Now listen, fellows," Chet interrupted, "you promised we'd hunt for that man Griff-----"

"Okay," Frank said, and turned right.

Two minutes later they reached the public dock where the Hardys had lost the men the evening before. The boys jumped out and began to search in the roadway for clues.

Joe was the first to notice a narrow dirt road which branched off to the left along the water's edge. Judging from tall patches of grass growing in it, the road was not used often.

But there was a set of freshly made tire tracks.

"Come here!" the boy called excitedly, and pointed out his discovery. "These may mean something. Let's follow them!"

The three hopped into the car. Almost subcon-Chet in
Difficulty 165

sciously Joe glanced at his wrist watch, for he had become accustomed to timing their ten-minute rides from the "singing" traffic lights. Now he subtracted two minutes. Where would they be in eight more?

The road twisted and turned, finally coming out on the highway. Here the tire marks Frank had been following became intermingled with others.

"Now what?" Chet asked.

Joe was excited. "Go on, Frank!" he cried.

His brother obeyed. Two minutes later Joe called a halt and pointed.

"At last," he yelled, "we've solved it!"

"Solved what?" Chet demanded.

Words tumbled from Joe's lips. Just ahead was the Mead home, and they were ten minutes' drive from "singing" light number three! The boy was sure the secret panel was in the house, with Lenny Stryker and the nurse hidden in a room behind it.

"Gee, I'll bet you're right!" Frank agreed, his heart pounding. "I'd better hide the car in case anyone's watching. We'll go the rest of the way on foot."

"Now listen, fellows," Chet spoke up, "you're not going to get me mixed up in anything dangerous. I only came along to find that guy who got my money and then stole my boat."

"Chet's right," said Frank. "Suppose we go by 3 roundabout route to the Mead boathouse first and see if the dory's there?"

Chet trailed the Hardys through a patch of woods 166 The Secret Panel to the water's edge. Then, creeping forward on their hands and knees, the boys made their way cautiously along the bank to the boathouse. Certain that no one had seen them, Frank stripped off his clothes and swam under the door of the building. Two minutes later he returned, his eyes shining excitedly.

"It's in there!" he whispered hoarsely. "The dory with the funny Y on it!"

"Gosh! You mean it?" Chet whooped.

"Pipe down!" Frank hissed in a low voice. "Do you want to spoil everything? I saw something else, too."

As he pulled on his clothes, he revealed that on a bench inside the boathouse lay a crumpled piece of fresh wrapping paper from the Harlington drugstore. This evidence

certainly linked the Mead house and the kidnapers!

"Say, Frank," said Joe suddenly, "remember when we were checking the switchboard and you got a shock that knocked you cold?"

"Sure do."

"When I was in the library, I heard a groan and raced back to you in the kitchen, thinking something had happened to you."

Frank looked startled. "I didn't groan. It was someone else!"

"Exactly!"

"Say, would you fellows mind telling me what you're talking about?" Chet demanded.

Chet in Difficulty 167

"Sure we'll tell you," Joe replied. "There's probably a hidden room in the Mead house.

You get into it through a secret panel. And behind that panel are two people who have been kidnaped."

Chet gulped. He hadn't meant to get so close to danger.

"It's time to act!" Frank said tensely. "Chet, you take the car and bring Dad here at once.

Tell him to give our special Hardy rap on the front door. Joe and I'll go inside the house and find the secret panel!"

Chet's teeth began to chatter. He did not relish his assignment at all, but at least it was better than entering the mysterious house. He left at once, returning to the main road by the route through the woods. The boy sighed in relief as he reached the car and opened the door. Another twenty minutes and-----

"Hold on!" a voice hissed in his ear.

Chet's heart almost stopped beating as a hand was laid on his shoulder. He was pulled around roughly and stood looking into a leering face.

Griff!

"At last we got you guys where we want you!" the man growled. "Come along! You're going to spend a few days with

me. In the meantime, the boss will take care of those friends of yours, the Hardys!"

CHAPTER XX

The Secret Panel

"let's go!" whispered Joe, as soon as Chet was out of sight.

Using the boathouse, then shrubbery as cover, the brothers finally reached the Mead mansion without walking in the open. While Frank unlocked the front door, Joe kept a sharp lookout. They were sure not a person had seen them.

Noiselessly the door swung open. The boys stepped into the somber hall. This time, not wishing to be seen, they did not try the lights. Knowing their way around, the brothers quickly tiptoed from room to room. Satisfied that no one was inside, they began their hunt for a secret panel.

Not a word was spoken. Taking it for granted that the secret opening was somewhere near where Joe had heard the mysterious groan, the boys concentrated their efforts on the library. Dividing the work, they started to examine the walls inch by inch. After a while Frank looked at his watch and was

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The Secret Pane!

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startled to find he and his brother had been in the house two hours.

"Wonder where Dad is," he spelled out on his fingers.

Joe shrugged. In sign language he replied, "Why don't we call out the names of Lenny Stryker and Miss Johnson? We

might save a lot of time."

Frank finally agreed. But, though the brothers shouted over and over again, there was no response.

"If there's any hidden room here, it must be soundproof," Joe concluded.

Once more the boys went to work looking for a secret panel. It was nearly an hour later

when Frank, tapping, pushing, and pulling at bits of the heavily carved paneling near the fireplace, made a discovery. On a design of an oak tree with branches and leaves, one leaf proved to be movable. Beneath it was a metal disk.

"I've found something!" the boy cried, and Joe leaped across the room to see what it was.

"I wonder what this disk is," Frank mused. "It's not a keyhole."

Both boys endeavored to slide the metal disk aside, but were unsuccessful. Suddenly Frank had an inspiration. Pulling a small magnet from his pocket, he held it near the disk.

There was a definite attraction between the two pieces of metal, but there was no movement of the disk nor of the mechanism which was undoubtedly installed in the wall behind it.

170 The Secret Panel "A bigger magnet might make this thing work," Joe suggested hopefully. "Maybe there's one hidden somewhere in the room."

He began to search. Frank too decided to look around. Inadvertently he dropped his magnet. To his amazement the small piece of steel began to crawl from the spot where it had fallen. In a moment it disappeared under the loose edge of the large rug. Quickly Frank pulled up the rug.

"Look!" he called excitedly.

Joe stared, dumfounded, at the moving magnet. Suddenly it stopped. Both boys fell to their knees and examined the floor. They were convinced a larger magnet must be hidden underneath. After a frantic search they found a floor board which was only laid in place.

Lifting it, the brothers yelped in delight. On a beam lay a large, powerful magnet.

"I'll try it against the wall!" Frank cried, and picked up the heavy piece of steel.

Hurrying to the metal disk, he directed the magnet toward it. The contact produced no results but the boys were not discouraged.

"It's got to do something!" Joe insisted. "Let's move the magnet back and forth!"

Frank did so. Suddenly the Hardys heard a click. At the same moment a large section of wall on which the oak was carved began to revolve around the trunk of the tree.

The secret panel!

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Frank and Joe held their breaths. As the opening became larger they found themselves peering into a room. Their

hearts almost stopped beating. On a cot lay a man. Beside him, seated near a reading lamp, was the missing nurse, Miss Johnson!

Joe was first to step over the threshold of the secret panel. The woman looked up. As she recognized the boy, terror came into her eyes. Jumping from her chair, she cried out: "No! No! Don't come in!"

The warning was spoken too late. Someone leaped from a corner of the hidden room and clapped a hand over the nurse's mouth. Simultaneously a man in the library gave Frank a violent shove against Joe. The two boys tumbled head over heels into the room. They got up quickly, ready to fight. But it was no use. The men bound them hand and foot.

Griff and Jeff!

"We've got you at last!" Jeff panted. "An just where we want you, too!"

In the meantime Miss Johnson had edged toward the doorway, hoping to escape and bring aid. But Griff caught the woman's arm.

"Oh, no, you don't!" he cried. "You're not going to get out of here."

She too was bound, and left on the floor. The two crooks surveyed their work, a satisfied grin on their faces.

172 The Secret Panel Suddenly there came an agonized groan from the patient on the cot. Jeff began to laugh hoarsely and then looked at the Hardys.

"You can have that sick boy to yourselves now," he jeered. "You been wantin' to find him!"

Griff picked up the magnet from the floor. "Come on, Jeff," he said. Turning to the

others, he sneered, "You won't be able to get out of here-unless I let you out! And I don't intend to!"

The two men stepped through the opening into the library. As the Hardy boys watched in horror the secret panel closed.

They were prisoners!

CHAPTER XXI

Trouble in the Dark

Miss Johnson's bonds had been tied hastily. With little effort she was able to remove them. Then quickly she unfastened the ropes which bound the Hardys. The boys dashed to the secret panel and endeavored to open it.

"It's no use," the woman told them. "I've tried and tried."

"And there's no other way to get out of this room?" Frank asked her.

The nurse said there was not a window or door in the place. She had searched in vain.

"But fresh air gets in here somehow."

"I've concluded it comes through the ceiling. But, as you see, that's very high and there's no way to get up to it. I shouted until I was hoarse. This room is soundproof."

Frank and Joe were annoyed with themselves for being trapped. Their only hope of escape now was that their father would be able to figure out the way to open the secret panel.

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174 The Secret Panel "But maybe Jeff and Griff will take the magnet away with them!" Joe cried out.

The boys looked and looked for a means of escape, but they could find none. Finally they sat down on the floor to talk over the situation.

"Please tell us everything that happened to you after you left our house," Joe said to the nurse.

Before Miss Johnson could begin her story, the patient on the cot groaned again, and tried to get out of bed. The woman rushed to his side and held him down. She asked Frank to dissolve a tablet in a glass of water on the table and give it to the patient. In a few moments he became quiet.

"This boy is dreadfully ill," Miss Johnson said. "He should be in a hospital. Oh, those wicked people, to keep him here."

"Do you know who he is?" Frank inquired.

"I believe his name is Lenny Stryker," the nurse answered. "I don't know how he got mixed up with those men. I judge from their conversation his being shot was an accident.

They're afraid to let him go for fear he'll notify the police."

"Do the men come here often?" Frank asked.

The nurse revealed that someone came once every day to bring food and anything else needed for Lenny. No one had ever stayed very long until the night before. Then the tall one called Jeff had posted himself in the room.

"I was sure something was going to happen," she stated. "That was why I had my eye on the secret Trouble in the Dark 175

panel when it began to open. Oh, how I wish you had not gotten yourselves into this trouble!"

Frank and Joe tried to reassure the woman. They mentioned having sent their friend Chet Morton to bring Mr. Hardy.

"Your father is a great detective," Miss Johnson conceded, "but maybe your friend never reached him."

Frank and Joe jumped. They had not thought of this possibility. Miss Johnson went on to say she had overheard the men talking about posting guards on the grounds. The Hardys'

spirits sank.

"Probably Chet is a prisoner himself somewhere," Frank said, worried.

"That would account for Dad not getting here," Joe added. Then, as a worse thought struck him, he cried out, "Gee, maybe Dad's a prisoner too!"

As the hours dragged by, their fears increased. Also their hunger. They wondered if anyone would bring food. There seemed little likelihood of this now, because the crooks no doubt would make their escape while they had the chance.

"They've taken everything of value out of this room, anyway," the nurse said presently.

"What were they?" Frank asked.

"Mostly ornaments; beautiful things."

"Did anyone come besides the two men who were here today?"

"Oh, yes," Miss Johnson replied. "The man they call the Boss."

176 The Secret Panel The nurse described him as a tall, slender, middle-aged man with long, thin fingers.

"His fingers almost haunt me," the woman said. "He used them the way you imagine a ghost would."

Frank and Joe were excited by her information. They thought at once of their father's theory that a clever, inventive person was opening the museum doors by some unusual method.

"What else did the men say?" Joe asked the nurse eagerly.

"They talked very little," Miss Johnson answered. "But one thing I did hear them say: they planned to take their loot away by boat, as that was the only safe method."

"By boat!" both boys exclaimed.

They knew the harbor police were constantly on the lookout for suspicious boats. There had been no report of any thieves prowling about the bay. What sort of craft did the Boss have, and where had he gone in it?

"I'll bet I know what kind of boat he used," said Frank suddenly. "One of those little underwater craft Mr. Dwyer makes."

Joe agreed, and thought the crook probably was far away by this time. More hours dragged by.

Miss Johnson told how she had been captured after leaving the Hardy home. Someone on the street, who seemingly was only going to pass her, took hold of the woman's arm. She had screamed, then suddenly a handkerchief had been held against Trouble in the Dark 177

her face. Some strong-smelling drug on it had made her faint. When the nurse regained consciousness she was in an automobile, and a few minutes later was brought into the mysterious room.

"I have no idea where I am," she said.

Frank and Joe told her. Miss Johnson had never heard of the Mead house, and was intrigued to learn that the owner had installed doors and windows without visible hardware.

The boys refrained from speaking of the museum robberies or any other angle of the mystery, because Lenny Stryker was stirring again.

Suddenly the patient leaped from his cot. Wild-eyed, the boy tried to run around the room. Miss Johnson and the Hardys caught hold of him, but he fought them off like a tiger.

A moment later the light went out. Lenny became quiet at once, and for several seconds there was absolute silence. Then came an indistinct, grating noise. The Hardys were sure the secret panel was opening!

Quickly they made their way toward the noise and Frank whipped out his flashlight. But before he could snap it on, Lenny started off again and knocked it to the floor. Screaming and waving his arms, the delirious young man made it impossible for the others to get to the secret panel.

CHAPTER XXII

A Distracted Family

suddenly the light went on in the mysterious room. Chet Morton was sprawled on the

floor. He looked up in terror, then relaxed as he spied the Hardys. Picking himself up, he gasped:

"Gee, it's you fellows! Am I glad!"

But Chet's momentary elation faded when the brothers did not return his enthusiasm.

They pointed to the delirious youth, who now lay in a heap on the floor, and introduced Miss Johnson, the nurse.

"Gosh!" Chet cried. "Let's get out of here!"

"We can't," Frank told him simply.

Chet Morton's eyes roved around the room. Then he caught on. Joe nodded, saying, yes, they were prisoners.

"We're behind the secret panel which can't be opened except with a large magnet. And that magnet isn't here."

The stout boy sat down on the floor and wagged 178

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his head. Why, oh, why had he let himself get into this fix? Every time he tried to help the Hardys on a case, he got himself into trouble. He vowed then and there this was positively the last time. Then he shuddered.

"Maybe this *will* be the last time," he thought ruefully. Looking up at his friends he added, "What are we going to do?"

"I take it you never contacted Dad," said Frank. "Suppose you tell us what happened to you."

After they lifted Lenny to the cot, Chet mournfully related how he had got no farther than the boys' roadster before being captured. He had been taken to the Mead boathouse and locked inside.

"I've been there ever since," he said. "Once that guy called Griff brought me some food.

Oh-----"

The boy stopped speaking as he suddenly remembered something. From his pockets he pulled out several sandwiches wrapped in paper, and passed them around to the others in the room. For once Chet did not talk about being hungry himself, and insisted the Hardys and Miss Johnson eat every bit of the food.

"Isn't there any other way to get out of this room?" Chet wanted to know presently.

"None that we've discovered so far," Frank told him. "But let's try again."

While Miss Johnson did what she could for the patient, the three boys began another minute examination of the paneled woodwork in the room. This 180 The Secret Panel went on for some time. Every piece of carved design seemed to be intact.

They had about decided to give up the search when Frank came to a section where a bird had been cut into the wood. It perched on a tree branch about five and a half feet above the floor. The boy studied the bird's head and body carefully. Then on a hunch he put his fingers on its heavily feathered wing. Gently he pushed it up and suddenly the wing moved.

"Come here!" he cried excitedly.

The other boys leaped to his side. Miss Johnson turned the lamp so that its beam shone directly on the bird. Beneath its wing three tiny slits were revealed.

' 'The symbol!" Joe yelled instantly. ' 'The strange open Y!"

For several moments everyone stared in amazement. Miss Johnson came over to look at the boys' discovery.

"What is it?" she asked.

Frank looked toward Lenny Stryker and put his fingers to his lips. Miss Johnson assured the youth that her patient could not hear what was being said.

"I don't know what this is," he said. "But we've found this strange mark several times and we think it's a clue to a gang of thieves. Somehow Lenny Stryker got mixed up with them."

"You think this house is their headquarters?" the nurse asked.

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"It begins to look that way," Joe replied.

He told her of the stranger they had met on the road some time before, how he had given them a key to the house, and asked them to turn off a light in it. The man had said he was John Mead, and wore a ring with the peculiar symbol on it.

"Since then we've heard that one of the gang wears such a ring. We don't know whether or not he's the person we met on the road."

"Did you happen to notice whether any of the men who came here wore such a ring?"

Frank asked the woman.

After a moment's thought Miss Johnson said she could not be sure. The tall man called the Boss had worn a large signet ring, but the nurse had not noticed the design. She recalled, however, that he had mentioned the word "museum" once.

Frank was sure the strange symbol under the bird's wing had a significance. There must be something hidden beyond it! After working on the slits for several moments, he gave up.

Joe, then Chet, took a turn. Even Miss Johnson, intrigued by the idea, tried her hand at it, but not one of them could make any impression on the slits in the wall.

More hours dragged by. The prisoners became hungry and discouraged. They took turns pounding on the secret panel, but they felt sure, from the almost noiseless thuds produced, that the panel door was heavily insulated and so the sounds were deadened.

182 The Secret Panel "It's eleven o'clock," groaned Chet. "We've been gone from your house over twelve hours."

Back at the Hardy home Frank and Joe's mother and aunt were frantic. They had not thought much about the boys' absence until evening. Mr. Hardy had gone out and could not be reached. Unable to stand the strain any longer, Mrs. Hardy went to the telephone and called the Morton home.

"Is Chet there?" she asked the boy's mother.

"No, he's not in. Who is this?"

Mrs. Hardy revealed with a sinking heart that Chet had left the house with her sons directly after breakfast and she had not heard from any of them since.

"It's unusual for them not to telephone if they're going to stay away," she said. "But I'm sure they'll be home soon," she added, trying not to alarm Mrs. Morton.

"Oh, I hope so," the other woman replied anxiously. "Those boys sometimes get into such dreadful situations. It worries me when I don't hear from Chet."

It was fortunate for her peace of mind that the conversation ended at the moment it did.

Mrs. Hardy had barely said good-bye when the telephone rang again. This time it was Chief Collig on the wire.

"Mrs. Hardy," he asked brusquely, "are Frank and Joe there?"

"No."

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"Then let me speak to Mr. Hardy."

"He's not here either. Oh, wait a minute. Someone's at the door."

She hurried to find out who it was and was relieved to see her husband. She asked him to go to the telephone at once. As the detective listened to Collig, his face grew grave.

"Have you tried the hospitals?-They're not there? -I'll be right down!"

Mr. Hardy had received very disturbing news. Chief Collig had said the boys' roadster had been discovered overturned in a ditch some miles out of Bayport. There had been no sign of either Frank or Joe, and no report of the accident.

"When did you last hear from our boys?" the detective asked his wife. Upon being told, his face clouded. He said he must leave at once to look for them.

"You know something you're not telling me," Mrs. Hardy cried, grabbing her husband's arm as he was about to go out the front door.

"I have a notion their car was stolen. I'm going to drive out to the spot where it was abandoned and see if I can pick up any clues." He was out the door before Mrs. Hardy could make any protest and on his way to Police Headquarters.

Collig was not supposed to be on duty. But when the report of the overturned Hardy car had come in, the Chief had returned to Headquarters. So many mysteries in which the Hardys had been involved 184 The Secret Panel had been solved without him that he was not going to let this one slip through his fingers! Furthermore, he secretly admired Frank and Joe and was determined to assist them.

He went with Mr. Hardy to view the overturned car, which had gone off the road about five miles to the west of

Bayport. With flashlights, the two men examined the ground carefully. There was not a sign of any footprints.

"That's strange," the officer grunted. "We haven't had any rain to wash 'em away, either!"

Mr. Hardy did not speak. Slowly he walked back along the road in the direction from which the roadster had come. Reaching a spot about one hundred feet from the car, he played his flashlight over the area and found a set of footprints.

"Here's your answer," he called out. "Pretty daring person."

It was the detective's belief the driver of the car had jumped out and let the roadster go on to wreck itself. Only one person was involved, and that was neither of his sons nor Chet Morton.

"It's a relief to know that," Mr. Hardy concluded, "but it doesn't find the boys. I'm going back to town and start a search."

Collig had his own ideas, so the men separated. Mr. Hardy went at once to 47 Packer Street, and examined the house carefully. Learning that the boys were not there, he drove to various spots which he previously had had under surveillance in connection A Distracted Family 185

with the museum thieves. The net result of his investigations was discouraging.

Tired and worried, he returned home at seven o'clock. Refreshing himself with clean clothes and some coffee, he was ready to start out again. Mrs. Hardy and Aunt Gertrude, who had slept only fitfully, asked what he intended to do next.

"I'm going to the Mead house," he said, trying not to show his concern. "I've an idea the boys have found out something and are spying on the place."

He did not tell the two women his real fears. The detective was convinced now that his sons, and probably Chet Morton, were in the hands of the very men he was trying to capture!

CHAPTER XXIII

Holding a Suspect

within a half hour after Mr. Hardy had left home, the doorbell rang. Hoping the caller would have good news, Aunt Gertrude dashed to answer it. A man she had never seen before stood there.

"Is this the Hardy house?" he asked, taking off his hat and smiling. Learning that it was, he added, "Are Frank and Joe at home?"

"No," Aunt Gertrude replied.

"When do you expect them?"

"Suppose you tell me your name and why you wish to see them," said Miss Hardy.

"My name is John Mead."

Aunt Gertrude reeled. She put one hand to her forehead and grasped the doorjamb with the other.

"You seem surprised to hear that," the stranger remarked. "Is there something peculiar about it?"

"I-I-we-thought-you-were-dead!"

The caller laughed. "Me dead? I'm very much alive. What gave you that idea?"

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By this time Gertrude Hardy had collected her wits. She had heard enough of the mystery her brother and the boys were trying to solve to know that the person who stood before her was one of the suspects in the case. She was hesitant about inviting him into the house; yet she was fearful of letting him go.

As calmly as possible Miss Hardy asked him to come inside. Calling loudly for her sister-in-law, she escorted John Mead into the living room. The boys' mother hurried in.

"Laura, this is Mr. John Mead," Aunt Gertrude announced.

Mrs. Hardy felt faint, but she tried not to show it. The three sat down. It became evident to the caller that the two women were very nervous.

"My coming here seems to have upset you," he said. "A few days ago I met Frank and Joe Hardy on the road. I had trouble with my car and they kindly helped me out."

The two women nodded.

"I recalled having left a light burning in my house, so I gave the boys a key and asked them to go there and turn it off. I just got back to town and I'd like the key."

He stopped speaking, expecting one or the other of the women to say something, but both remained silent. They were staring at a ring he wore on his finger. This was the first time they had seen the strange open-faced Y. Suddenly Mrs. Hardy realized that the awkward pause had been rather long.

"Oh-ah-yes," she said. "I believe the boys did have a key; but they are not at home now and I don't know where it is."

"You don't mean they've lost it?" Mr. Mead asked quickly.

"Oh, no," the two women replied together.

Aunt Gertrude again brought up the subject of how they had heard that John Mead, who owned the house on the bay, had died five years before.

"I see what you mean," the caller smiled. "He was my uncle."

"Your uncle!" Mrs. Hardy cried. "We thought he had no relatives."

"I guess everyone thought that," John Mead went on. "To tell you the truth, my uncle was a rather eccentric man and people knew little about him. He was not married, and my father and I were his only living relatives. We lived in England most of our lives.

"A few years ago I received a strange note from my uncle. He wrote that he was sending me a box and would explain its contents later. He wanted me to be sure of receiving the gifts before telling me what they were."

John Mead explained that the box contained the ring he wore and some odd-looking keys; that was all. He had written to his uncle at the Bayport address saying the package had come, but he had never received a reply.

Holding a Suspect 189

"Apparently Uncle John died just at that time, but I didn't know this. It seems no will was found, but my father once told me my wealthy relative was leaving everything to me.

Recently I arrived in this country and came here to Bayport thinking I'd see my uncle.

"During my inquiries about his death I heard of Mr. Hardy and his sons, and how clever they are. When I actually met your boys on the road, I thought it would interest them to go out to the house and find out how to get in."

Though the stranger seemed nice enough, the two Hardy women were suspicious of him. Aunt Gertrude quietly left the room, went upstairs, and telephoned to Police Headquarters. Chief Collig, still out on a personal hunt for Frank and Joe, was not available, but the sergeant on duty promised to send a plain-clothes man over at once.

During Aunt Gertrude's absence from the living room, Mrs. Hardy mentioned the light Mr. Mead had said he left burning in the house, and asked what kind it was.

"An electric lamp," the man replied.

"I should have thought the power company would have shut off the current," she said,

looking at the caller intently.

"No doubt they did," John Mead replied. "But my uncle had an auxiliary system of his own."

This explanation seemed plausible enough; yet the detective's wife found it hard to believe that it 190 The Secret Panel could still be in running order after five years of disuse.

A few minutes later the doorbell rang. Aunt Gertrude hurried to the hall to admit the plain-clothes man. Quickly she

whispered her suspicions to him, then brought him into the living room. She introduced the policeman as a friend.

"I must be going," John Mead said quickly. "I'll come back another time for the key."

"How will you get into your house?" Aunt Gertrude asked him bluntly.

The caller explained he had a key to the back door of the mansion. As he started to leave, the plain-clothes man blocked the doorway.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions," he said.

For several minutes the detective quizzed the stranger, but learned nothing from him other than what he had told the two women. Finally John Mead became irritated.

"You'd think I'm some sort of criminal!" he burst out. "I know this is a detective's home, and you probably think everybody who comes here is a suspect of some kind, but I can't see why I warrant such treatment!"

"Well, if you must know, you *are* a suspect," Gertrude Hardy burst out.

John Mead looked as if someone had struck him. He recovered himself in a moment, however, and demanded to know what she meant. Mrs. Hardy suggested they all sit down.

Holding a Suspect 191

"This man is a policeman," Aunt Gertrude explained. "And if you try any funny work, Mr.

Mead, he'll arrest you!"

"I assure you I'll not try any funny work," John Mead said, his eyes blazing angrily, "but I insist upon knowing why you are virtually holding me a prisoner."

"That ring you are wearing was stolen from a museum!" Miss Hardy cried excitedly.

"How do we know you didn't steal it yourself?"

John Mead turned pale. Nervously he insisted he was not a thief, and that he had received the ring by mail from his uncle.

"Your story sounds on the level," the plain-clothes man spoke up. "But if you're going out to the Mead house I'm coming along."

"And we are too!" chorused the women.

They thought it best not to mention the fact that Mr. Hardy was out there searching for the boys. Moreover, they were so worried about Frank and Joe they wanted to be on hand in case of trouble.

The plain-clothes man drove the four in a police car. Reaching the Mead house, they found Mr. Hardy and two of his men still trying to get into the mansion. The detective was surprised to see his wife and sister, and even more so to meet John Mead. He scrutinized the man closely and decided at once his story was true; if he was involved with any crooks, it was not to his knowledge.

"I'm very glad you came," the detective said. "I 192 The Secret Panel have reason to believe there's trouble inside the house, and I was just about to break in.

You have a key?"

"Yes, to the back door."

Mr. Mead led the way toward the bay side of the house, found the secret keyhole, and opened the door. He remarked that he had spent many hours at the place before discovering how to get in.

The man clicked a wall switch, and the lights in the kitchen came on. He told Mr. Hardy of the secondary electric system in the house.

"That explains one of the mysteries," the detective said. "My boy Frank received a bad shock and we could not understand what made the current go off and on. I feel sure someone has been tampering with the system."

Mr. Hardy and his two men, after searching the house thoroughly, returned to report they had not found the boys.

"You may as well go home," Mr. Hardy told his wife and sister. "Thomas here," he added, referring to the plain-clothes man, "will take you back. I'd like Mr. Mead to stay."

After their departure, Mr. Hardy gave John Mead a sketchy account of the mystery on which he was working. He revealed the part Lenny Stryker had played in it, and how the only clue to his whereabouts lay in the secret panel.

"Trails lead to this house," he said.

John Mead was dumfounded. He had no idea Holding a
Suspect 193

the house contained anything of a secret nature other than the peculiar doors and windows, but he could well imagine his eccentric relative might have built in a hidden room.

"Uncle John was very inventive, my father told me. Perhaps he had a secret place where he worked. But I never heard of one."

Mr. Hardy was sure John Mead was telling the truth. Nevertheless, he signaled to one of his men to keep close watch of the fellow; not only to see that he did not escape, but to watch him and see if his actions gave a hint that he knew more about the secrets of the mansion than he had admitted.

Mr. Hardy and the other detective went outside and surveyed the house carefully. They decided that architecturally the most likely place to build a secret room would be off the library. They went inside and began a careful examination of the carved paneling in that room.

The boys' father astutely focused his attention on the fireplace, and it was not long before he located the telltale oak tree with its movable leaf. He realized at once that the only way to move the disk would be with a magnet of considerable power. Hoping that one was hidden in the room, he cast his eyes about the place.

At this instant the keen ears of the plain-clothes man near the hall door detected a slight sound. Instantly he made a hissing noise to put the others on their guard. Extinguishing their flashlights, the 194 The Secret Panel three detectives melted into the shadows of the furniture, one of them pulling John Mead with him.

The front door opened and closed again. Footsteps came along the hall. Finally a figure came stealthily into the

library and walked directly to the fireplace. The four men watched intently.

Was the intruder going to open the secret panel?

CHAPTER XXIV

The Capture

the shadowy figure which had entered the Mead home carried a large package under his arm. He deposited it in the library fireplace, mumbled a few indistinct words, and stepped back.

The detectives and John Mead waited. To their disappointment the fellow did not touch the paneled wall. Instead, he tiptoed toward the hall door.

Mr. Hardy stepped from hiding and pinned the man's arms behind him. Startled, the stranger tried to wrench himself free, but was confronted by two more detectives. A flashlight was focused on his face.

Mike Matton! Mr. Hardy identified the fellow at once from a description Frank and Joe had given him of the dishonest locksmith.

"I ain't denyin' it," Matton said. "Take your hands off me!"

"What are you doing here?" Mr. Hardy demanded.

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196 The Secret Panel "I could ask you the same question," the fellow replied with a sneer.

"Open that package!" the detective ordered him.

At first Mike was inclined to be insolent and not obey. When he was told the police were looking for him and it would go still harder with him if he did not tell the truth, the fellow changed his mind. He pulled the string from the bundle in the fireplace and several fine door knockers rolled out.

"Where did you get these?" Mr. Hardy asked him.

"I ain't sayin'."

Under grueling questioning, however, Ben Whittaker's former assistant admitted he had stolen them. He told a story of being in debt from gambling and of having taken this means to pay his bills.

"I know a guy who collects these things," he said. "And as soon as he comes he's goin'"

to pay me a lot of money for them."

Mr. Hardy asked how soon the man would come. At this the fellow became frightened, and said he hadn't meant that. He became so confused, Mr. Hardy could not be sure what the true story was.

"Give me the key you used to get in here!" the detective demanded.

Matton refused to do this, so he was searched and the key taken from a pocket. It was new. Under questioning the thief finally said that a stranger had brought the original to Ben Whittaker's shop to have a duplicate made. The key was so unusual Mike had made one for himself as a keepsake. Mr. Hardy

The Capture 197

doubted this story but could get nothing further from the young man.

"Where's the secret panel?" he asked suddenly.

Mike Matton looked blank, and the detective was convinced the man knew nothing about it. He ordered one of his assistants to take the fellow to Police Headquarters. Matton put up a struggle, but handcuffs were clapped on him and he was driven to town.

Mr. Hardy continued his search for a magnet. It was not long before his keen eyes detected the loose floor board. Hopefully he raised it. To his relief the magnet lay beneath.

It was only a matter of moments before the famous detective had the secret panel revolving. He leveled the beam of his flashlight into the mysterious room beyond, and breathed a prayer of thankfulness.

"Dad!" Frank and Joe cried in unison.

Mr. Hardy had steeled himself never to show emotion in public. But he was so relieved to see his two sons and Chet Morton unharmed that he hugged each of them in turn. A moment later, however, he regained his composure. He spoke to Miss Johnson, who thanked him for rescuing her.

"This is Lenny Stryker," Frank introduced the youth on the cot.

The young man, whose condition had improved vastly during the morning, sat up. "I hope you ain't going to arrest me, sir. I ain't a thief," he said.

"Don't try to talk, Lenny," Frank said kindly. "We'll tell Dad your story."

198 The Secret Panel The Hardy boy retold Lenny's experiences as he had given them a little while before.

The fellow's uncle had asked him if he would like a job and earn some money to help his mother. But the boy had been tricked.

After being introduced to several other men, Lenny realized they were about to rob a museum. He had wanted to have no part in it but had been forced to go along. The youth had been so nervous he had been unable to do his share of the work; this had been to take away the guard's gun, and because of his mistake, Lenny had been shot.

"I can't understand," Mr. Hardy said to him, "why your uncle should want an

inexperienced person along on such a job."

"I guess he was trying to get square with my mother," the young man told him. "He's my father's half brother and wanted to marry my mother. But she didn't like him and now I can see why. I guess she knows he ain't on the level."

The boy revealed that his uncle had a clever instrument which he used in robberies; a device which would open locks and silence burglar alarms. It was not a key, Lenny said, but he did not know exactly what the gadget was.

"My uncle bragged that he invented it," the youth concluded his story.

Mr. Hardy nodded. "That explains a great deal," he said, then asked suddenly, "Is your uncle Whitey Masco?"

The Capture 199

"You know?" Lenny cried out in alarm. "Oh, please, Mr. Hardy, don't send me to jail!"

"I'm not going to send you to jail, Lenny. As a matter of fact, I'm going to send you home to your mother. But I shall get that uncle of yours behind bars just as fast as I can. You can help me by telling everything you know about Whitey Masco."

Lenny could tell little. He had no knowledge of his uncle's personal life, and most of the boy's harrowing experience after being shot was known already. It was purely accidental that he had overheard Masco say, "We better hide the kid behind the secret panel." Left alone for a few seconds in a house to which he had been taken temporarily, Lenny had dragged himself to a telephone and called his mother.

"It's very lucky for us you did that," Mr. Hardy told him. "And now, Mack," he added, turning to one of his men, "take Lenny and Miss Johnson to the Stryker home." To the nurse he said, "Martha, would you mind going on from there to my house and telling the folks what has happened? Assure them we're all right, but the boys and I still have a job to do here and we may not get back for several hours."

Frank and Joe offered to carry Lenny to the waiting car, but their father held them back.

It would be wiser if they did not show themselves outside. With so many people coming and going, spies in the garden might become confused and think no one was 200 The Secret Panel left in the house. And that was just what he wanted.

"But what are we going to do here, Dad?" Joe asked.

His father smiled. "Follow a hunch of your brother's," he said. "Frank whispered to me a while ago that he'd like to stay and do some special investigating."

The detective directed Mack to flourish Mike Matton's key for the benefit of anyone who might be outside, and make a great ceremony of locking the door.

"Come back here with another car," the boys' father directed him, "but park it along the road beyond this property."

After they had gone, Mr. Hardy turned to Frank and said he was ready for the investigation. His son led the way to the paneled wall in the secret room, pushed aside the bird's wing, and showed his father the three slits which formed the strange Y symbol.

"We tried to discover what to do with them, but we had no success," Frank said. "Can you tell us anything about them, Mr. Mead?"

The man shook his head. He reiterated his former statement of knowing nothing about the secret devices in the elder John Mead's home. "The whole thing is a great mystery to me," he said.

Mr. Hardy was staring at the unusual ring on the man's finger. Now he asked Mr. Mead to take it off so that he could examine it. Obliging John Mead handed over the ring, and watched eagerly as the de-The Capture 201

etective took a magnifying glass from his pocket and studied the strange Y insigne.

Suddenly Mr. Hardy smiled broadly and moved something with his fingernail. To the amazement of the onlookers the top of the ring raised up on a tiny hinge. Beneath it lay the three pieces of a miniature key in the shape of the Y symbol.

Mr. Hardy picked up the key and set the three prongs at right angles to the diminutive handle. Quickly he inserted the key into the slits on the wall and in a moment pulled open a small door.

The others gasped. Within the opening beyond lay bits of exquisite and rare jewelry. Mr.

Hardy recognized them at once as objects stolen from the museums.

"Loot!" Frank yelled.

"Yes," his father agreed.

Joe's sharp eyes had spied a piece of paper lying on the floor of the little safe. He picked it up and read aloud: This device must never be used. Upon my death I ask that it be given to the F. B. I.

John Mead Young Mr. Mead stared in blank amazement. "But there's no device here," he said.

"What could my uncle have meant?"

"I believe that is easily explained," Mr. Hardy told him. "Your uncle was an inventor. His main

202 The Secret Panel interest was in locks and keys. He probably figured out a gadget which could open any lock without the use of a key."

"But how could there be such a thing?" John Mead asked.

"Wonderful things are being done these days in the field of electronics," Mr. Hardy explained. "Your uncle's device may work by radio beam, or he may even have figured out some

combination of metals which make a new and powerful magnet."

"Do you think he destroyed it before his death?" Mr. Mead asked.

"Indeed I don't," the detective replied. "I think Whitey Masco stole it. That is the device the thief has been using to get into museums!"

John Mead was silent a moment. Then he inquired how the crook could have made a key similar to the one in the signet ring. Mr. Hardy told him about the duplicate which had been stolen from a museum.

"I believe the fellow is wearing it," he said. "It's possible your uncle knew about the one in the museum, and being interested in clever ideas, copied it. There are many bits of the story still to be filled in. Our job now is to locate Whitey Masco. Then we can get the rest of the details."

"How are you going to capture him?" Joe asked his father.

Mr. Hardy admitted he had not formulated a plan of action as yet. He was afraid the crook, knowing The Capture 203

the police were hot on the trail, might go into hiding again for a long time.

Suddenly Frank gave a yell. "I have it!" he cried. "We'll capture that guy tonight!"

The others stared at him, unbelieving.

"Tell us your idea!" Joe demanded eagerly.

CHAPTER XXV

The Key to the Mystery

the three Hardys and John Mead waited inside the dark mansion. It was nearing midnight, and so far nothing had happened. But Frank was sure his hunch was right; that Whitey Masco would return to the Mead home for his treasures and take them away in a recently purchased underwater boat.

"He probably knows some secret entrance to this place, even an underground passage, and will be able to sneak in without being seen. Masco will figure he has nothing to worry about, but we'll nab him!"

Frank and his father were posted in the inner room behind the secret panel, which was now closed. Joe and Mr. Mead had hidden behind furniture in the library. The four men had fortified themselves against hunger by eating some concentrated food tablets Mr. Hardy

always carried with him.

Suddenly there came a barely perceptible sound in the hall. A moment later Joe was sure a third person had entered the library. But the phantom figure moved in complete darkness.

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The Key to the Mystery 205

A slight thud. The unseen man must be removing the floor board which covered the magnet. A few seconds later there

was a slight change of air. Joe was positive the intruder had opened the secret panel.

In the inner room Mr. Hardy and Frank were tense. They had hidden in a corner of the room. Now they knew someone had opened the secret panel and was moving on tiptoe across the room.

The place was in inky blackness, and for several moments there was not even the sound of anyone breathing. Frank and his father had just concluded the intruder had gone out again, when their ears caught a faint thump. The man must have laid down the magnet.

Again silence. Was he trying to open the wall safe? Then the Hardys caught a tiny ray of light shielded in a cupped hand. It gleamed on the three slits under the bird's wing. From the darkness came three prongs to fit them.

The safe opened. The unseen man uttered a low curse. Mr. Hardy pressed Frank's arm, then jumped the fellow while the boy snapped on his flashlight. There was a slight tussle as the detective took the man's gun from him.

"You got him!" Joe cried, leaping through the doorway.

"Yes, I have Whitey Masco at last," Mr. Hardy replied grimly. "A long-wanted criminal who will commit no more robberies, nor send me threatening letters. Feel like talking, Whitey?"

206 The Secret Panel The prisoner flashed looks of hate at the detective and his sons. He knew them, but gazed at Mr. Mead without recognition.

"Another dick?" he asked.

Mr. Hardy shook his head. "This is Mr. John Mead who owns this house."

Whitey sneered. "John Mead's dead." Then he added, "He was a clever old man, but I guessed his secrets."

"You knew my uncle?" Mr. Mead asked in astonishment.

"So he was your uncle, eh? Sure I knew him. Met him on a train once and got myself invited here," the crook bragged.

Now that he had started talking, Whitey could not resist the temptation to boast. He told how "the old man" had revealed perfecting a device with which a person could commit the perfect crime. The inventor had said it was well hidden and never would be used.

"But I found it!" the thief gloated.

Suddenly Whitey realized he had talked too much. Mr. Hardy had been waiting for this.

He went through the man's pockets, and in vjne of them found a small device which looked like a miniature radio. When a small lever on it was pressed, a long magnetized needle shot out.

"Was that my Uncle John's invention?" Mr. Mead gasped. "The gadget which can open any lock and silence burglar alarms?"

The Key to the Mystery 207

"Yes," Mr. Hardy replied. "And the F. B. I. will be *very* interested in it. Suppose you and I run down to Washington and present it to them, Mr. Mead."

During this conversation Whitey had been edging toward the secret panel. Suddenly he made a dash through the opening. But Frank and Joe were on him in a second.

"We'd better get this fellow down to Headquarters," Mr. Hardy said sternly. "Shall we use your underwater boat, Whitey, or the police car?"

Whitey Masco was startled by the question. So the detective and his sons knew about

his boat! He grew sullen, and refused to talk. But as they all drove to Bayport Mr. Hardy related to John Mead the story of Whitey's past. How, with the police hot on his trail as a bank robber, he had hoped to throw them off the track by robbing museums. How he had tried to make Lenny a gangster to get revenge on the boy's mother. How he had known of old Mr. Mead's ring with the strange Y insigne; and, upon finding the original from which it had been copied, had stolen it from a museum in order to open Mr. Mead's safe beyond the secret panel.

"Then the rest was easy, eh, Whitey?" Mr. Hardy remarked. "Well, here we are at Headquarters."

#

Within a week Mr. Hardy had rounded up the other members of Whitey Masco's gang.

Jeff proved to be the one who had dropped the valuable stolen book at the garage. It was he, also, who had tarn-208 The Secret Panel pered with the auxiliary electric system at the Mead home. From a motor in the boathouse a cable ran underground to the cellar. Thus it was Jeff who, while working on the motor, had been directly responsible for Frank receiving the bad shock.

When Griff was captured, he admitted having taken the old dory from the Mead boathouse and sold it to Chet. He thought Whitey Masco did not know about the boat. But when his boss, who had locked some loot in the fish box, learned of the sale, he had threatened Griff with his life if he did not bring back the dory.

"And where do I come in?" Chet Morton asked. "I want my money back!" The boy had been invited to a celebration dinner at the Hardy home.

"The police will see to that," smiled Mr. Hardy. "In fact," he added, as the doorbell rang, "I believe an officer may be here now to talk to you."

Chet turned pale. "B-but, Mr. Hardy, I didn't do anything. I----"

"Please answer the bell, Chet."

Trembling, the Morton boy managed to get to the door. When he opened it Patrolman Riley stepped into the hall.

"Just the person I want to see," the policeman said importantly. "Suppose you tell me everything you know about the stolen dory." Riley felt very good. Now was his chance to get even for some of the kidding he had had to take from the stout boy!

Chet tried to tell his story, but the words stuck in The Key to the Mystery 209

his mouth. In the midst of his explanation, Riley pulled an envelope from his pocket and handed it to the youth. When Chet's shaking fingers opened it, he looked at the patrolman.

"Why-why, it's money," he stammered.

"Yes, that guy Griff sent it to you," Riley explained. "Just sign that receipt for the police records."

"And I don't have to go to jail?" Chet asked.

From behind him came whoops of laughter. Frank and Joe could restrain themselves no longer. They had known of Riley's coming, and told their father they'd like to play a joke on their friend. For a moment Chet looked blank, then he grinned sheepishly.

"Okay, fellows," he said. "You win this time. Guess it served me right for dealing with that crook. But say," he added, "you promised to bring me up to date on the mystery."

"Glad to oblige," Joe replied. "What's bothering you?"

"Did the same person who stole the fingerprint folder out of your father's file kidnap the nurse?"

"Yes. One of the gang by the name of Bondy. He was on a bus with Aunt Gertrude, and stole her keys. Whitey Masco gave him the job of getting the fingerprint file that night Miss Johnson was here. When he overheard that she was a nurse, he decided to kidnap her to take care of Lenny.

"So it wasn't Mike Matton?" Chet remarked.

210 The Secret Panel "Well, then, why was Matton trying to break into your house?"

Frank explained that Ben Whittaker's dishonest assistant had been misinformed that Mr. Hardy owned a unique

collection of hardware-souvenirs of cases he had solved-and Mike had hoped to obtain them and sell them to Masco.

Matton had struck up an acquaintance with Whitey Masco when that crook had come to the shop and had the locksmith make a key from a wax impression. Whitey had secretly procured this impression during a call on old Mr. Mead.

Mike Matton decided to make a duplicate for himself when Whitey Masco wouldn't tell him what the key opened. Mike found out the crook collected old and rare hardware, so he told him he'd get some and meet him at a certain place. Through his work at homes of wealthy people in Bayport, the fellow knew where there were valuable door knockers and locks.

Whitey agreed to buy the loot, but failed to keep the appointment. Mike, who had once heard Ben Whittaker mention the unusual Mead locks, went out to the house. He was puzzled when he could find no keyholes. After several visits he discovered the strange lock on the front door and found that the odd-looking key fitted it. Masco was not there at the time, but Mike felt sure that he was using the house as a hide-out and would return. He decided to bring the stolen hardware there and lie in wait for Masco.

The Key to the Mystery 211

At this point in the story Chet heaved a sigh. "Can't we go back to dinner?" he asked.

"You can tell me the rest while I'm eating."

Mrs. Hardy laughed. "I'm glad there's someone around here who doesn't forget to eat when there's a mystery being solved."

Frank, Joe, and their father looked guilty. The younger boy said, "Mother, we'll probably have nothing to do from now on but eat. Not a mystery in sight."

"I wouldn't depend on that," Aunt Gertrude spoke up. "And I'd not have to be a prophet to think so, either. As soon as that roadster of yours that Griff wrecked is repaired-----"

She was right. Another case popped up for the Hardy boys even before Whitey Masco was brought to trial. It involved a strange search for *"The Phantom Freighter."*

"You know, Chet, we almost caught the museum thieves twice," Frank told him. "Once, when Joe and I were inside the Mead house, Whitey was there too. Jeff was outside. He dumbly yelled to his boss, 'We'd better go now!' "

"Gee," said Chet, wide-eyed, "you might have been caught yourselves!"

"The other time was when I heard the groan," Joe explained. "It came from Lenny Stryker. Whitey Masco was just opening the secret panel from the inside."

"Whew!" cried Chet. "That was close!"

"Guess I got away just in time," said Joe. "It scared Whitey, though, because once before his men had seen us there when they came in a car. Remember the time they backed out in a hurry? So he helped himself to the vacant house at 47 Packer Street and deliberately had his men put fingerprints around it to throw us off the track."

"And used me for a dope," Chet said, shaking his head sadly. "But you fellows got me safely out of that place, thank goodness."

"And I'm thankful all of you are safe," said Mrs. Hardy. "I never know from minute to minute--"

The doorbell rang again. Mr. Hardy asked Frank to answer it.

"The caller may be Mr. Mead," he said. "I invited him to come. On the other hand," the detective added, looking searchingly at his sons, "it may be news of another mystery."

"I sure hope so," the Hardy boys said together.

THE END

THE SECRET PANEL

By FRANKLIN W. DIXON

No. 25 in the Hardy Boys series.

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